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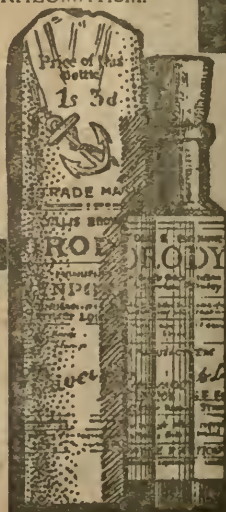
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A Strong Man's Way

CHAPTER I

ISOBEL GREY MAKES HER CHOICE

"THANK God! Whatever happens now, I am safe. No hateful marriage, no living with a man I loathe and despise, no more a mere pawn on the board of life—but free, free as air, with all the wide world before me. Oh, dear Heaven, how thankful I am!"

As she stood leaning over the deck-rail of the great liner, Isobel Grey's eyes shone with a happiness that had not shown in them this many a long day, and she felt indeed that a great load of sorrow and impending dread had been lifted from her heart.

"He will never suspect, never find me," she reflected triumphantly, as her radiant glance searched the thousands of densely packed men and women shouting good-byes and waving last farewells to their loved ones, crowding the ship's side as the huge liner drew slowly away from the quay towards the middle of the stream. "To think that to-day would have been my wedding-day, had I not seized the only chance left me to escape."

She blushed vividly as the man at her side, whom hitherto she had failed to notice, turned towards her with a smile on his rather sad-looking face.

"I trust you managed to pick out your friends from amongst them all," he said in a cultured voice. "These few moments, when handshakes are no longer possible, are always the hardest of all to bear."

The girl smiled into his kindly eyes but shook her dark head.

"I have no friends. No one came to see me off. I am afraid I was just beginning to feel a trifle sad. But," with a rare smile, "that is hardly the spirit to face life 'down-under,' is it?"

The man drew a trifle nearer, and she noticed, as he showed less of the shining shabbiness of his thin black coat, that he wore the garb of a minister.

"I fear not," he said cheerfully. "Those whose steps lead them to Australia must face the future with a brave heart. There are so many failures at first, so many disappointments. But you, I am sure you will be happy enough, especially if you are going to friends."

It was very nice to feel that one who had been to Australia before took an interest in her, and, under the Reverend Arthur Lisle's kindly questioning, Isobel quickly responded.

"I can't quite say I am going to friends, and yet perhaps that is how I ought to feel about them, until I should unhappily have cause to regard them to the contrary. You see, I applied at the Agent-General's office for a post in Australia, and a friend of his who is interested in emigration has recommended me to some people he knows out there."

The minister looked interested.

"Did you say you were going to Walong?" he asked.

"Yes; and from Walong to an up-station called Henner's Lode."

Lisle looked pleased.

"Oh, I know Henner's Lode quite well. It comes, with Walong, in my district. I have charge of a tract of land many thousands of miles square. Perhaps one day, when I come on a mission to Henner's Lode, we may meet again."

The girl smiled.

I'm sure I hope so. I shall be staying, for a time at any rate, with Squatter Brant."

"Dear me, how strange! I know Phil Brant and his wife. She's quite young, and a very nice body, too."

Isobel felt a keen desire to learn a little more about her friends across the globe.

"Is she an English girl?" she asked.

"Oh, dear, no! Very few squatters and station-hands marry English girls. They prefer those who are Australian born."

Isobel's brow rose in surprise.

"I do hope I shall be a success," she murmured, gazing at the fast receding flat shores with troubled eyes. "My work will be to make myself generally useful in an up-country farm."

"Where you will find the men rough, and the women perhaps even rougher. But, believe me, their hearts are right, and once you win your way into their affections, you have gained the esteem and respect of the grandest people in the world. Many new-comers, however, give up before the battle is won. I hope, for your own sake, you won't be one of them."

With a kindly nod he walked away, and although many a time after that Isobel met and spoke to him again, the minister never referred to their first conversation.

She was glad when a month and ten days' sailing brought the bold outlines of Sydney Heads in sight. To the right, as they entered the vast opening, Mr. Lisle pointed out the broad inlet of North Harbour, at the top of which Manly lies.

It was all very beautiful and very wonderful, and Isobel heaved a sigh of genuine regret when she left the steamer, and Sydney lay behind, a grand panorama under a light smoke pall, and the winding rail-track crossed a swiftly flowing river, mounted a steep gradient

beyond, and thence descended quickly to the rich and lovely pastures of Illawara and Shoalhaven.

By orchard-clad slopes the journey was continued to the ridge till it dips again through rugged hills, bright with native flowers, to the Hawkesbury River.

Away to the west were the Blue Mountains, an abrupt barricade beyond which the unknown future lay. The flowing streams, like the winding of silver ribbon, meandered through fertile plains where cultivated patches stood out in squares of soft brown and green and yellow.

Then the rolling lowlands again, with mile upon mile of close-clipped green, where sheep grazed in millions, and only the white walls and gleaming shed tops of a wayside station gave signs of human habitation.

At noon the following day, Isobel, gripping her bag, stepped out on to a tiny platform. Henner's Lode lay a good twelve miles distant from the railway track, and the thought of tramping it alone over the rough back country was not a little disconcerting, even to a girl of Isobel's resource. But in the station yard a strong voice, rich and full and musical, hailed her :

" Say, young woman, are you the girl for Brant's station ? "

Isobel flushed. The greeting was even cruder than she had expected.

" Yes ; I am going to Mr. and Mrs. Brant's," she said slowly, conscious of looking into a rugged bronzed face, handsome despite the several days' growth of bristly hair on the firm, rounded chin.

" Right-ho ! Chuck your bag up here, and climb in. Phil Brant—we don't call 'em Mr. and Mrs. out here, you know—he's expectin' you round about the tea hour, and there's just a bit of quizzin' to know what sort of a hand you'll make at gettin' the tea full on. What's your name ? "

As Isobel took her seat in the buggy beside him, she

felt ridiculously small. Well over six feet in his stockings, and straight as a larch, the young backwoodsman seemed to tower above her.

"Isobel Grey," she answered quietly.

"Right, you'll be Izzy or Grey out there afore you know where you are. Mine's Strong—Jim Strong. Get up, you brute!" He flicked the long whip with a snap that made Isobel's blood run cold as the thong fell across the mare's back, and she reared more with surprise than with pain.

"You shouldn't strike the animal like that; she's going very well," she ventured to remonstrate.

Strong's great head came round, and his clear eyes flashed.

"Who asked you to interfere? I'm running this part of the show. Your job is to sit still, until Brant and his missis start chasing you round."

Isobel's heart began to fail her. If this was the way they were going to talk to her, she felt she would never win through.

"I'm not used to being told to 'shut up,'" she retorted coldly. "Of course, it's ridiculous to quarrel when we haven't known each other five minutes, but the sooner you learn how to speak properly to a woman, the better."

Jim threw back his head and burst into a peal of hearty laughter, which showed his even white teeth.

"I see! Like all the rest of new-comers, want breakin' in. I guess I'll get Phil to give me the job."

A little patch of scarlet began to deepen in the girl's cheeks.

"You wouldn't like the task. You might find you had a stronger will against you than you'd care to tackle."

Again a good-humoured smile played across the man's rugged face.

"I believe you're right, young woman ; it would be a bit of a battle between you and me. But, there, I guess I'd win."

"We shall see," Isobel murmured to herself, and asked him at the end of a silent half-hour what a mean collection of wooden walls and galvanised roofs, showing above a wind-swept waste of brown baked earth, was.

"That, missy? Why, that's Henner's Lode," Jim answered, pointing with his whip. "The collection of shacks where you've elected to chuck in your hand. Say, d'you think you'll find it a bit too lonely?"

Isobel tossed her dark head and bit her under-lip.

"Not I! Why should I? There'll be heaps to do, and I love to be busy."

The man glanced somewhat critically at her small, gloved hands.

"Better take them mittens off. Young Ursula might poke game more'n a bit."

Isobel blushed, but felt he meant to be kind.

"Who's Ursula?" she asked.

"Lou Brant's sister. The only girl on the station, she is. You must get your hand in wi' Ursula."

His voice dropped to a guarded whisper that brought a look almost of fear to Isobel's eyes.

"Why? Won't she be very friendly?" she asked.

The man made a grimace.

"Never can tell. You're a new 'un, you are, and the boys, they make some fuss of young Ursula. What'll she say, d'you reckon, if the chaps should turn all their attentions on to you?"

The girl's finely chiselled mouth began to quiver.

"Of course, they won't do anything of the kind. I've come here to work, not to have attentions shown me. In that respect, you can well leave me to take care of myself."

Jim couldn't repress a smile. Her hands looked pitifully small and white against his big brown scarred

ones ; the coral nails and the soft gleaming skin showed she had never been used to hard work.

" Well, I'll plump for you, thick and thin," he said, shooting her a quick admiring glance that suffused her beautiful face with colour.

" Thank you, but I shan't need anyone's championing. I don't mean to be unkind," she stumbled blindly on, feeling she had expressed herself badly. " You'll quickly find I'm a young woman quite capable of taking my own part."

Strong snorted and tossed his big head.

" All right. Let it go at that," he jerked out shortly. " Only don't, later on, come whining round to me if you want any jaw-punchin' done."

" I'm not likely to whine to anyone, least of all to you." Her tones were studiously sarcastic, but at sight of a man in his shirt sleeves leaning over the wooden paling she adopted a more conciliatory manner. " Is that Mr. Brant ? "

" Your boss, for sure—at least, one-third. Lou and Ursula'll do the other two-thirds, and you won't find 'em so bad if you come off your perch a bit. Say, Phil, I've brought *the* goods along."

He leapt down, and although he took charge of Isobel's scanty luggage, he made no effort to assist her to the ground. The buggy was high ; she jumped, and reeled, and turned faintly dizzy as a stab of pain shot into her right ankle. Brant watched her in silence as she struggled to her feet and came towards the gate.

" Welcome, Miss Grey," he said, without taking his cutty from his mouth. " The missis and her sister are inside. Had a pleasant journey, I hope ? "

Isobel forced a smile.

" Thanks, very pleasant. I hope, Mr. Brant, I'm going to be very useful to you all. May I go in ? "

" Sure. Jim'll show you round."

She left him still standing at the gate, with watchful

eyes searching the wide stretch of baked pastures, and went somewhat timidly in. On the threshold she drew up suddenly before a pungent reek of thick tobacco smoke. Some seconds passed before she really took in the nature of her new home.

Then the mist began to clear before her smarting eyes; she saw four wooden walls of rough-hewn logs, one side broken by a patched window-pane and a couple of flaring lithographs. To the left, a glass cupboard made of match-boarding was covered by a red curtain. Next to it was an open stove, with blistered galvanised pipe running high up, at right angles, into the wall. A crudely made table, two chairs more or less dilapidated, and half a dozen packing cases on which men lolled in attitudes of careless ease, completed the picture.

Slowly her gaze travelled from one to another of the rough, bearded fellows, open and honest of countenance, who merely nodded to her as she stood on the threshold. Like Strong, they wore rough trousers and torn gaiters, and, above them, grimy shirts open at the neck. And in every mouth a clay or briar pipe was stuck.

In one of the chairs a young girl lolled with her feet to the stove, although outside the sun sweltered. In one hand she held a brown earthenware teapot; the other, toil-stained and work-scarred, reached towards the steaming kettle on the coals.

"You're Isobel Grey, aren't you?" she said, turning her good-looking face, lit by a pair of bold dark eyes, on the girl. "Guess you'll be glad to get some tea?"

Isobel thanked her, and remembered Jim's words.

"Yes, if you'll allow me to give you a hand," she responded briskly, and slipping off her thin jacket she tidied her straying hair before the cracked mirror and started to look round for the tablecloth.

Ursula brought the filled pot to the table, and set it down with a bang.

"Never mind, we won't trouble about it now, as you're tired. Lou!"—raising her voice shrilly—"the hired girl's come."

Isobel stared hopelessly round, feeling all her good resolutions would speedily vanish.

But she smothered her indignation and, as Mrs. Brant bustled into view, extended a friendly hand.

"As your sister says, I'm the hired girl, Mrs. Brant, and I expect to make myself useful. Really, I'm not in the least hungry. Will you tell me what I can do straightway?"

Lou Brant looked her critically up and down.

"No offence meant, you know," she replied ingenuously. "But we're all plain folk here. Better take off them fine things, and put some of Ursy's on. They'll be more fitting for the work of the house."

Without a word, Isobel followed her into a small but scrupulously clean room. A single bed, a home-made washhandstand minus a basin, and a single chair completed the furniture. But if it lacked comfort, she gave no sign of it, and quite cheerfully dressed in one of Ursula Brant's day frocks.

Mrs. Brant eyed her not unsympathetically.

"I don't know quite what you've been used to, Isobel," she remarked. "At first you may find things a bit rough, but after a while you'll settle down. We're all on the same level here—that's about the size of your remembering for the present. And if Pat Ryan do get a bit out of hand sometimes, and the boss is away round the station, jest you put Jim on to him, and Jim'll see all square."

A little thrill of pride shot through Isobel Grey.

"I'm sure I shouldn't do anything of the sort," she said firmly.

The ring of Strong's taunt still sounded in her ears, and all her will was on her lips just then. Mrs. Brant left her, and a few minutes later she went down the stairs.

At the end of the first turn she stopped—stopped abruptly.

A voice she recognised—Strong's deep, full voice—was raised, and every word came distinctly to her ears.

"I tell you, mates," he was saying, "at last I've met a girl with a will pretty well as good as my own. Pretty well, I said—but not quite."

"You'd never conquer her, Jim," Pat Ryan answered with a laugh. "Did you see how her peepers flashed when Lou told her to quit her fine togs? There's some spirit, and you'll be taking on more'n you can manage if you get up against it."

Although she could not see him, Isobel knew that Strong was smiling—smiling all over his good-looking face, with his teeth shining above and below the stem of his pipe.

"Put your opinion where you put your baccy—in your cutty, and smoke it," he muttered, staring at Ryan steadily, and from him all round the room into every face in turn. "Jim Strong's not the fellow to be put off by anyone or anything. I made up my mind, I did, as I came down from the station, to get the whip-hand of that young woman, and I'll do it."

Ryan spat into the stove.

"Thank goodness summut's going to happen to liven up the dullness of this dead hole," he grinned. "What's the lay-out of the cards, Jim?"

Thus challenged, the young backwoodsman felt he must make good.

"To break her will first—and then to make her love me. A woman'll do anything for the feller she loves. Boys, Ursula is going to get a bit out of joint over this job, but my mind's made up. I mean to win Isobel Grey. Here, tell you what I'll do! I'll bet the whole crowd half my next season's shearings that inside of six months the new hired girl will be my wife! Now, then, who's taking me?"

"All the lot of us!" rose in a jocular chorus.

Phil Brant moved in from the gate and lolled in the open doorway at sound of the hilarious laughter.

"What's the scream, anyway? New girl putting her hoof in it?"

A lumbering stockman lounged to his feet, and knocked his pipe against the stove.

"No; worse nor that. Jim here says he'll marry the new station-hand in half a year. What's your opinion, boss?"

The squatter shook his head.

"He'll never win through. She's a lady, she is, from the sole of her foot to the crown of her head. Goodness knows what brought her out of the Old Country to a shack like this!"

The stockman sat down again, and leaned his bare arm on the table.

"Who is she, anyway? Your missis had the engaging of her; she oughter know."

Brant coughed discreetly behind his hand.

"She knows no more about her than you do, Jack. She's a mystery, that's what she is—a large-sized mystery from England. Even the emigration agent down at Sydney couldn't give us no points. P'r'aps she's a rich gel run away from home 'cos she rowed with her parents. You can't never tell."

"Then I guess I'll make up to Jim some," Pat Ryan laughed. "If he's going to sport a dook's daughter for his bride, my manners'll want polishing a bit."

Jim swung round with an ugly patch of colour in his bronzed face.

"Shut your mouth, Pat. I'm not stalking the girl for what she is, whether her father's a lord or a dustman. I'm rounding her up because she's got more spirit than the whole shackful here put together. Now, then, look friendly—here she comes!"

Purposely Isobel had made a noise on the stairs, and

her face was very white as she showed in the doorway. What should she do? She had neither time nor opportunity to decide the question, for as her foot came to rest on the last step, the sprained ankle twisted under her again; she fell forward, gave a little cry of pain, and fainted clean away just as strong arms enfolded her and saved her from a nasty fall.

CHAPTER II

ISOBEL TREADS THE HARD, LONE WAY

ISOBEL opened her eyes at last on a world which was strangely unfamiliar. Night had fallen with strange suddenness, as it does in tropical lands, and the bright fireglow and the steady-burning lamp gave the Brant's homestead a fairly comfortable appearance.

Lou Brant sat by one side of the open stove darning stockings; Ursula was busy with a dirtily thumb-marked copy of a periodical many months old.

For several minutes Isobel watched the girl from under half-lowered lids. The clear, bold eyes were no longer sparkling with good nature, and a petulance hung about the full, red lips.

Suddenly Mrs. Brant looked across to her sister.

"Well, Ursy, what d'you think of her?" she asked in a subdued whisper.

Ursula's good-looking face came up with a sudden toss of her head.

"Haven't had time to think—only if she's going to upset me with the men there'll be trouble, that's all. I've heard of them tricks before—spraining ankles, fainting, and such-like—jest to fetch a feller dangling round. We can't do with it, Lou; it don't fit in. There's heaps to be done on the station, and I reckon I've had more'n my share too long. She'll have to be round and about to-morrow, or I'll know the reason."

Isobel bit her under-lip till her small, even teeth made deep marks in the soft skin. Her first impulse was to get up, to drag an apology from this ill-natured girl, and,

once for all, to show them that if she *was* a hired girl she had feelings which she meant should be respected.

But in the long silence which followed she seemed to hear the soft, warning voice of the missionary pleading with her. Doubtless deep down in their hearts these people were kind.

"I'm most awfully sorry," she said, sitting up and forcing a wan smile. "Whatever possessed me to come over like that I don't know. Do let me give you a hand."

She rose painfully to her feet, and noticed for the first time that her left ankle was wrapped in a cold bandage.

Mrs. Brant put down her work.

"Just you stay where you are, Isobel. Ursy can do all that's necessary."

Lou Brant's younger sister turned in the doorway.

"Oh, yes, I dare say; but the sooner this young woman gets well enough to buckle to, the better I shall like it. You know well enough, Lou, we ain't got time to look after invalids."

Isobel showed a smiling face.

"Of course you haven't. I understand that; and I'm going to help you. Let me take the things."

She moved in the direction of the cupboard, but every step she took caused her excruciating pain, and drove what little colour was left out of her cheeks. For all that, she spread the much-darned tablecloth and laid out the cracked plates and dishes as Ursula handed them to her; and when Phil Brant came in and sat himself down at the table, she took the packing-case beside him and ate eagerly of the rough but plentiful fare.

Soon after ten the family retired to bed, and Isobel, with a thankful heart, dragged her way to her room. Blowing out the candle, she went towards the open window, and seating herself with difficulty on a chintz-covered box, stared thoughtfully out into the blue night.

"I wonder if I shall ever get used to a life like this?"

Isobel reflected, and propping her soft, rounded chin in her upturned palms, she stared out on what seemed a scene of utter loneliness.

Her mind went back to the homeland—to the projected marriage now seemingly so far away—to the friends and home she had left for ever, rather than sell herself body and soul. That, at any rate, was something to be thankful for ; she was still free.

This was her only solace during the first night on Brant's station, and so slight a one that she felt she had not the heart even to undress and seek sleep in the hard bed. Instead she lay down just as she was, and as the deep blue of the night faded to opal and turquoise and the round-sailing moon sank again to rest, salt tears moistened her pillow and left diamond drops upon her cheeks. And strangely enough her sleep was not troubled, but tintured with kindly thoughts of the rough, untutored man who had come to the station to meet her.

Always the vision of his strong, rugged face and steady, clear eyes came between her and the darker pictures of life—and she awoke at last to hear herself in fancy calling out to him for his protection.

Of course, it was only a foolish dream, for which she hated and despised herself.

Very quickly the station woke to life, a crude-voiced bell clanged in one of the sheds, and scantily attired men appeared as though by magic and performed their morning ablutions in an immense trough of water.

Isobel watched from her window as she tidied her burnished hair.

" Why, they are nothing but big rough schoolboys ! " she told herself, and laughed outright as she saw Jim steal softly up behind Pat Ryan, and, dropping the towel, with which he was making his face shine, seize the unsuspecting man and topple him head over heels into the trough.

Pat came up fuming and spluttering, and for the next ten minutes a cloud of dust showed where the two rolled and struggled in the soft brown earth.

At the finish Jim helped Pat to his feet.

"Guess we'd both better peel up a bit before the duchess appears," he laughed; and with that the bulk of both his and the Irishman's body disappeared once more into the trough.

By the time Isobel limped into the shack the stove was roaring and the station yard devoid of life. But afar off she could make out the forms of mounted men clear against the skyline, as they rounded up the sheep and brought them, in immense droves, towards the wool-sheds.

Ursula greeted her with quite a friendly nod.

"Hope you slept all right," she said, and then, suddenly placing her arms akimbo, stared at the girl. "Why, what's the matter? You've been blubbing!"

"That I'm sure I haven't!" Isobel retorted indignantly, forgetting all about her red eyes. "Except for my ankle, which still pains a bit, I never felt better or happier in my life. I think this is just lovely," turning to the open door and standing full in the rich warm sunlight. "There's a freedom about life out here which we never enjoy at home. I'm sure I shall love it."

The faintest suggestion of a mocking smile lingered on Ursula Brant's lips.

"It's up to you, you know, to make your life as you want it to be. We're all right, if only you take us the right way, and don't try any of your fine English airs on us. That's what riles us, see, when girls who want to be ladies come out from the Old Country and try to make us look small and uncomfortable. But I say," turning from the bacon sizzling in the pan, "what were you on the other side?"

Isobel coloured furiously.

"What do you mean—what was I? Why, just the same as I am now. I mean——" She broke off, neither knowing how to answer nor how to avoid answering.

Ursula dropped the fork on to the table and stood straight in her path.

"You know—what did you do for a living? Where did you live? What's your father? Does he do any work—and where do he and your mother live? We like to know all these things—to get hold of something about the outside world; and straight, no one will be quite content until they know as much about you as you do yourself."

Isobel shook her head, and the pretty mouth was set in firm lines.

"Then I am afraid you will all be very disappointed," she replied slowly. "I have nothing to tell any of you—except that I came to New South Wales to earn my living, and that I hope I shall never go back to England any more."

"Oh!" Ursula came to rest on the corner of the table, and her bright eyes twinkled suspiciously. "I see. There's a bit of a mystery about you. I want to know all I can, because, for sure, they'll be asking me."

Isobel felt herself turning hot and cold by turns.

She clenched her small hands by her sides and swung round on Ursula, her face red.

"I don't mean to be questioned by anyone. You can tell them all from me to mind their own business, as I shall mind mine. My job is to help in the work of this house; there it begins and ends."

Ursula threw back her head and laughed.

"There you go again. Fancy me telling the boys that! As soon as not they'd throw a bucket of water over me. Of course, I shan't say anything of the kind. A nice sort of way that would be—after all Jim did for you. He'll be proper wild when I put the lid on him

by telling him, 'with Miss Isobel Grey's compliments, to mind his own business,' " and with studied sarcasm she made an elaborate curtsy before the other girl.

Isobel bent closer to her task, her face flushed more vividly bright than before.

"Why do you keep bringing up Mr. Strong's name? I'm not in the very least interested in him," she retorted. "Admittedly, he was kind—but any of the others would have done the same. I don't want you to mention his name to me again."

Ursula paused in her task of cutting huge slices of bread and stared at the hired girl, while her right hand held the knife with a huge slab off the loaf poised in mid-air.

"What? Not gone on Jim? You must be a cake! Why, there's not a girl on a station within fifty miles who wouldn't give her right hand to be Jim Strong's wife. Now, then, isn't he the finest looking fellow you've ever seen?"

"Well, certainly he's handsome and big and strong. But he doesn't interest me at all. I tell you, Miss Brant, I don't want to think or talk about men. My duty is to attend to my work. No; I don't like Mr. Strong, if you want the truth, and if I had my way I'd never let him touch my shoes."

Ursula entirely misunderstood her meaning.

"Not that he's likely to. Everyone does their own foot covering here, when they do get cleaned, which isn't often. Once a month, perhaps, if there's anything doing in the town, or the missionary should happen to ride over. And for why should you think Jim would be anxious to clean your boots, I don't quite understand."

"Nor do I, quite. All the same, I've done them, and here they are!"

Both girls swung round with a start—to find the stockman's towering form darkening the sunlit doorway.

Jim strode in with a laugh on his sensitive lips, and, as

Isobel met his twinkling eyes and buoyant face, she noticed that he had shaved and that his hair was neatly brushed and shining, as though oil or water had been carefully applied to it.

"You've confounded me out of my own mouth," she said, meeting his gaze fearlessly. "I said I didn't want you or anyone to clean my boots. I am merely the hired girl, and as such determined to look after myself. All the same, I'm very much obliged."

Ursula shook with glee.

"There you are—coming down off your perch at once, directly anyone shows you a bit of notice! My word, Jim, you should have heard the things she's been saying about you and the rest! Not that some of it wasn't true."

Jim leaned against the doorpost and poked tobacco into the bowl of his pipe.

"Like that, is it? Well, I guess Isobel will look on us a bit-different when she begins to sift down. How's the foot?"

She knew he was taunting her both by the use of her Christian name and by the challenging note in his laughing voice.

"Again I must eat my words," she answered, with a faint smile. "For what you did for me I am very grateful, although I should much have preferred you hadn't put yourself about."

The man blew a thick pungent reek into the room.

"Tell you what it is, girl," he answered, in even tones. "You want a strong, big man to take you in hand. Bless me, there'd be a few good battles for a bit, but as soon as you realised you had met your master, you'd be as nice as nice can be. Ain't that so, Ursy?" winking across to the smiling girl.

"Of course. She may meet him when Felix comes," Ursula laughed. "He is a proper lad to keep the girls dangling on a string. And, my word, doesn't he know

all the tricks of the trade—just the town gentleman to a T! Never saw such a fellow with the girls in my life. A real way with him, he has. Father and me are riding out to meet him this afternoon."

Jim nodded, and had Isobel been watching him just then she might have noticed that a curious glint came into his straight blue eyes. However, she did not see, for he gave a quick glance at the loudly ticking clock and ambled off into the station yard.

Isobel set the brown rashers on to a cracked dish and popped them in the oven.

"Who's Mr. Felix?" she asked, in a more conciliatory tone, feeling that to quarrel openly with Ursula was both unnecessary and a bad beginning.

"Felix?" Ursula drew the packing-cases and the chairs round the table. "Why, my cousin, of course! Used to be very sweet on me till I found out he was just the same to every girl—makes love to 'em for all he's worth, only to slide off when they begin to think he's serious. Sure to make a dead set at you. Ring the bell, will you?"

Isobel was only too glad of any diversion, so, dismissing Felix from her mind, she went to the door and watched the electrifying effect of the summons on the corral and yard. From every door and block of galvanised sheds roughly garbed men trooped out, and though their hands were dirty, and a pipe was stuck in the corner of every mouth, they crowded into the shack like a pack of happy, care-free schoolboys.

"'Mornin', miss! 'Mornin', Belle! 'Mornin', Isobel. 'Mornin', new hand! 'Mornin', new chum!"

One by one, as they passed her, they dropped her a friendly nod and a salute, and though their way of expression was crude, she felt they meant to be kind.

"Good-morning, all of you!" she replied, and at a sign from Mrs. Brant, who just then appeared from the dairy, she set the pile of bacon in portions and handed to

each his share. Cans and mugs and cracked cups of strong brown tea, far blacker and stronger than Isobel had ever seen drunk before, were ranged about the board, and, while they ate and drank noisily, some of them still stuck to their lighted pipes and finished the meal in a cloud of tobacco smoke.

Jim strode in last of all, and, fastening a terrific grip on the nape of Pat Ryan's neck, heaved him bodily off the stool and sent him reeling half-way across the shack.

"That's my place—next door to Isobel," he said, with a grin, at which all the rest laughed. But their laughter changed to looks of surprise as Isobel calmly picked up her plate and knife and fork, and, passing round to the other side of the table, without a word took her place at the Irishman's side.

Pat grinned triumphantly.

"Sure, an' it's meself the colleen fancies!" he said in his droll way. "Go and shake yer big ugly self to the fowls, Misther Sthrong, and it's meself'll be after daling wid ye when the banquet is through!" And, leaning forward, he shook in the young stockman's face a clenched fist as big as a good-sized ham.

Even Isobel joined in the shriek of laughter which, however, left Jim quite unperturbed.

He leaned towards Isobel with his elbows on the table and his knife and fork poised in the air.

"Guess you won't be so attached to Misther Pathrick Ryan, Esquire, of Shillybobang, in the county of Corr-rrk, when the said Misther Ryan sets in to shelebrate the ber-ruth-day of Saint Pathrick, bedad!" he mimicked. "On which occasions, Miss Grey, the said Misther Ryan becomes a rale howly terror!"

A dull, angry flush began to creep up from the Irishman's neck to the roots of his red hair.

Isobel scented the rising storm.

"You're a lot of sillies, all of you! Now, Mr. Ryan, some more tea?"

Pat's temper began to subside.

"Shure, it's a vision of bheauty itselluf which attinds on me!" he replied. "And Misther Sthrong there'll be well advised to see the direction in which the lady desires to exhibit her favours!"

Phil Brant knocked out his pipe on the grate, and, amid a clatter of plates and knives and forks, the station hands trooped out, but not before each one, in passing, bestowed an admiring glance on the beautiful hired girl.

They talked of her in hushed whispers all across the yard, and Isobel began to feel very uncomfortable.

"Get the bowl and the water!" snapped Ursula, turning to Isobel with scarlet cheeks. "I can see you're going to bring trouble into the shack! Once get Patsy and Jim scrapping, there'll be an awful to-do."

Isobel's eyes opened wide.

"But surely they'll never fight over me?" she asked, in a scared whisper.

"Won't they, though?" Ursula scoffed. "You'd best be pretty careful where you throw your favours. Better make up for all you're worth to Cousin Felix. That'll put the whole crowd of 'em out of court straight off."

"Did you say he was coming to-day?"

The other nodded.

"I'm off almost now—as soon as Phil's got the buggy out. And Lou's coming, too, so you'll have the place to yourself. There's the stew-pan, a brace of rabbits, some neck of mutton, flour for the sooster dumpsters, onions, carrots, and potatoes. And don't forget a bit of salt, or Ryan'll kick up a 'rale shindy,'" with which parting shot she ran up the stairs to dress in her Sunday best.

Isobel stared round in hopeless amaze. What sort of a hand she'd make in producing a really eatable stew she hadn't the faintest notion. At home she had never been allowed within yards of the kitchen, where half a

dozen well-trained servants ministered to the wants of her father's table!

Still, she rolled up her sleeves, and, as soon as the washing up was done, produced suet and flour and a tin bowl, mixed the dumplings as best she could, peppered, salted, and floured the meat, placed it in the stew-pan with water and vegetables, and set it on the stove to simmer.

So engrossed was she with her task that she did not see Ursula and Mrs. Brant drive off with the sheep-farmer. A heavy step on the boards brought her out of a maze of wondering thought.

She glanced up to see Jim Strong watching her intently from the doorway.

"Guess you're not shaping so badly after all," he said, showing his even white teeth in a smile. "Say, Isobel, I'm out of order, ain't I, in being more'n a little interested in you?"

Her clear grey eyes met his steadily.

"I should much prefer that you kept your interest for your work," she answered calmly. "There's so much for all of us to do here, Mr. Strong."

She carried the dumplings towards the stove, and one of them plumped full at Jim Strong's feet. With a quick move he picked it up and, raising the lid amid a cloud of steam, dropped it in.

"That's a special one for me. Say, Isobel, you're getting your hand in fine. No one would have thought, to see you yesterday at the station, a lady to the fingertips, you'd be doing this sort of think for chaps like us."

His words were meant to be complimentary, and the admiring glance he bent upon her was too patent to be misunderstood.

She came towards the table again, her hands by her sides and her face looking squarely up into his.

"I'm glad for this chance to have a word with you alone," she said, trying to still the loud beating of her

heart. "I can see what my most difficult task will be here—to put myself right with everybody, and most of all with you. Last evening, just before I came downstairs, you were speaking about me to the men. You were good enough to single me out for your attentions—to make some remark to the effect that within a few months you proposed to make me your wife. Will you be so good as to kindly withdraw that statement?"

Strong looked down on her adorable loveliness, and his eyes gleamed.

"No," he answered very slowly. "I shall do nothing of the kind. I've set my mind on you, Isobel; you're just the sort of girl for me—a girl with spirit, who can put up a fight, keep her end going till she meets one stronger and better than herself. I'm that one, lass. When I saw you on the platform, getting out of the train, says I to myself, 'Here's the woman who's going to make Jim Strong happy. She'll want a bit of licking into shape, a deal of breaking in, but once you've got her she'll make the finest wife in all Australy.' Now then, Miss Isobel, that's the position, as between woman and man. What do you say about it?"

"Say?" A ripple of laughter burst from her moist warm lips. "Nothing—except that you're the biggest donkey on the station! I didn't come out here to get married, but to earn my living."

Strong shifted his position ever so slightly.

"What d'you call getting married but earning your living? It's a living I'm offerin' you—a shack of your own, a home for you and me. I'm strong and capable, and I've got a bit put by. It's a wife I want. I feel it in my blood—someone to give me a bit of comfort when I'm tired and hungry, someone to cheer me when I'm more than usual lonely, someone to brighten and make nice a shack of my own. Destiny's chucked you across my path. I've seen lots of girls over here but none to strike me as you've done"

She found herself staring up, half in fear and much in amaze, into his bronzed, good-looking face.

His eyes were on her—straight, clear eyes that seemed to burn into her very soul, and words of love hung on his lips.

Timidly her hand reached out and touched the brown of his arm.

"Don't think unkindly of me, Mr. Strong," she said, and her voice fell to a low whisper. "You don't understand women; they don't meet men to fall in love with them in twenty-four hours, and end up by consenting to marriage. I only want to be left alone—to do my duty by these good people who have taken me in and given me shelter and a living under their roof."

Jim's big fingers came to rest over her small hand, completely smothering it, and it tremored as he spoke.

"Then you turn me down?" he muttered, drawing back, and she noticed how his clear eyes had contracted.

"I don't turn you down, because I've never entertained any thoughts of you. You have been very kind to me. For that I am grateful. But as for imagining I want to become your wife—the very idea would never have occurred to me. If you want to retain my good opinion and my friendship, please never speak to me of love again. So long as I live I should never consent to marry you."

"Never! never!" He repeated the words. "You don't know me," he continued. "I'm a man never to be put off, never to rest, till he's had his way. I told you I made up my mind when first we met to make you my wife, and, though all the world stands between, I'll do it!" And, banging his immense hand down on the table, he leaned towards her, his blue eyes flaming with the passion of a great and consuming love.

She turned away and did not speak again; nor did she watch him as he crossed the station yard, his head

held high and his arms and legs moving in a rhythmical, determined swing.

But she tried to put away all thoughts of him in the interest of her work ; and, hurrying forward to get the tea on the table before Mr. and Mrs. Brant should return, she lost all count of time.

Her hands were busying with the crocks and knives and forks in the washing-up bowl when a soft footfall sounded almost noiselessly on the cocoanut matting. A tall form moved towards her, his eyes shining. He caught a glimpse of her face as she glanced out of the window ; then, with a quick movement, he stole up behind her, wound his fingers over her eyes, and drawing down her head to his shoulder, kissed her not once but many times full on the lips.

Isobel wrenched herself away and drew back, her face flaming, and through a confused riot of thought she was conscious of Ursula Brant's mocking voice :

" That's right ! Do it again ! Kiss her again, while you've got the chance. Now then, bring Miss High and Mighty off her perch ! Hurry up ! Put your arms round her and kiss her again, while I keep anyone from coming in at the door ! "

CHAPTER III

A STRONG MAN'S WAY

EVERY atom of pride in Isobel's proud and highly sensitive nature rose in flaming revolt against this outrage.

She gave one loud cry for help, and her cry, ringing across the station yard, was heard by a big lumbering form who just then emerged from the corral.

"Isobel!" he muttered, and broke into a rapid run as he heard her call again. A dozen long strides carried him to the threshold of the shack door; Isobel, with Ursula Brant holding one arm, and Felix Harper the other, was being forced to submit to the latter's caresses.

If ever a man saw red, Jim Strong did then. A fleeting glimpse of an upraised, appealing, white face, a tiger spring, a sweep of his huge right arm, and Felix was lifted off the ground. He went up and over like a loosely filled sack, and crashed terrifically against the galvanised pipe by the wall.

Life went out for Felix Harper just then. He dropped and lay face downwards on the freshly scrubbed boards.

Jim laughed, a soft triumphant laugh, that brought a smile of gratitude to the frightened girl's lips.

"Oh, I'm so glad you have come!" she whispered, leaning faintly against him. "These two—but never mind—look after him."

Thinly her quavering voice trailed away. Jim saw what was coming and, reaching out, picked up a glass of water from the table. Very tenderly he held it to her lips.

"Guess you had need of someone to protect you," he said in a strong voice, still holding her close. "As to you, young Ursula, it's a pity you haven't got a decent-sized woman here who could take you in hand and give you the larruping you deserve."

"You—you speak to me like that?" Ursula shrilled. "Phil, come here, and listen to what this hired man is saying."

A big form blocked half the rectangle of sunlight.

"Well, what's all this trouble?" he said, in a heavy tone which rolled round the shack like summer thunder.

"Trouble of their own making," rapped out Jim, flushing angrily. "This bit of town scum and that impudent baggage there combined in a disgraceful attack on Miss Grey, and I for one, Mr. Brant, won't have it."

Squatter Brant stared, and slowly drew his pipe from his thick lips.

"You—won't—have—it?" he repeated slowly, but this time his manner was that of aggressive restraint. "You are telling me in my own homestead what you'll have? Say, Strong, did I hear you right?" leaning forward with his hands on the table and his piercing eyes fixed straight on Jim's.

"I guess you did," Jim answered slowly. "Unless you want me to repeat it again. This is what I call dirty work—a full-grown man, and a spiteful hussy, making an attack on a defenceless girl—and a new-comer, too. About time someone stepped forward and made a bit of a to-do on the right side. Perhaps you'd better pick your relative up."

Brant stiffened, and all the latent anger in his nature rose to his lips.

"You've done that boy more'n a bit of damage, and he's my blood relative—my sister's son," came from him in grave, measured tones. "The job'll want a

bit of wiping out, Jim Strong, if you and me are to keep friends."

Isobel's soft hand came to rest on Jim's, and she turned to him appealingly.

"Please don't lose your tempers over me," she said quietly. "You will say and do things which afterwards you'll both regret. Look after Mr. Harper and forget that this has happened."

A noisy cackle of derision left Ursula.

"Easy for you to talk cheap. Look what you've done between you"—pointing to the prostrate man: "Easy enough to say 'Forget what's happened,' Miss Lah-di-dah."

Two angry spots of colour deepened in Strong's face.

"Unless that girl gets out, I'll drop her in the dipping trough. Now, Brant, jest you put a stop to it right now, or I'll be making some big trouble."

As he spoke he advanced on the station owner.

Strong man though he was, Brant fell back.

"You're forgetting," he muttered, edging nervously. "This isn't a prize ring, but my house. Now, see here, Jim, I don't want to quarrel with you, but the fact remains, you and me is no longer satisfied with each other. Hadn't you better be looking out for another job?"

Jim laughed.

"The choice of a job don't worry me, mate. One bit of work's as good as another, so long's it's straight and clean. But this ain't clean; it's dirty, mean, and despicable, and so long as I'm about I won't have it. You hear? I won't have it! There's going to be no more baiting of Miss Grey——"

Brant eyed the young man angrily.

"You'll have to pay for damaging Felix, that's what you'll have to do. I opine he's some battered—ribs broken, most likely, and you'll be lucky if it's only a case of compensation."

Jim laughed.

"Never mind. I've a bit put by, and if he likes to fight me in the courts down Sydney or Melbourne way for it, he can. Sorry, I've got some work to finish. Miss Grey, if you want me, just send word along." And with that he swung out briskly into the sleepy sunlight, leaving Isobel a prey to the most unhappy fears.

She was relieved, when they lifted Felix up and placed him in a chair, to find the damage he had sustained was little worse than a very severe bruising and the shock which had momentarily robbed him of his senses.

She busied herself laying out the table for tea, while Ursula, with many a sidelong furious glance and whispered sneer, tended to the rapidly recovering but crestfallen Felix.

"I tell you what it is," at last blurted out Ursula, unable to restrain her wrath any longer. "Some girls find the Old Country too warm to hold them, so they come out here for shelter, and then, because people like us put a proper value on 'em, they don't like it."

With quiet deliberation Isobel put down the cups on the much-worn tray, and raised her clear, true eyes to those of her enemy.

"If that remark was intended for me, you may as well know, once and for all, that, so far as you are concerned, the reason for my coming to Australia will remain a mystery."

"Well, you must have done something pretty bad, you a lady as you call yourself, coming out to New South Wales, with just about as much as you stand up in and nothing more. I suppose, all along, you've wanted to know what I've thought of you; now you've got it."

The younger girl stood very still, save for her lips, which quivered pitifully. In all her life she had never felt quite such loneliness as was come to her now.

"Will you take back those words?" she began, clenching her small hands; but the words died in her throat at sight of a stranger who just then entered the yard, and jumping off his horse, which he hobbled close by, strode briskly up to the door.

"Good afternoon, Miss Brant. Your brother about?" he inquired, extending a friendly hand, and nodding towards Isobel and Felix as the girl made no effort to introduce them.

"He was about the station yard a minute or two ago. Did you want to see him, Mr. Clarke?"

Billy Clarke crooked a long thin leg over the corner of the table, and twirled his soft felt hat.

"It doesn't much matter who I see, as long as I talk to one of the family. The governor's sent me down post haste to ask you, and Mrs. Brant, and Phil, and all the station hands up to Murrawonga. It's the dad and mater's silver wedding, you know, and we're having the place chock full with folk for miles around. He thought if the whole bunch of you set out at sunrise to-morrow morning you'd roll up about sundown and could then make two or three days of it."

Ursula forgot her quarrel with Isobel and clapped her hands.

"My word, Mr. Clarke, a regular corroborree. I guess the boys'll just about click with that notion. Who's coming, anyway?"

Billy bestowed a smiling glance on Isobel standing by the stove waiting for the kettle to boil, and rattled off a long list of names.

"I see. Every squatter and stockman for miles around," said Ursula. "You can take it we'll all be there. And thanks very much."

"That's right, all of you, mind. We want the whole station—even the Malay cook, if you keep one."

Ursula grinned.

"We don't. This is our cook—the new hired

girl. Reckon she can brighten up sufficient for our crowd."

"Then, of course, she will come along. The governor would be most upset if anyone were left out. And, Miss Brant, you'll not forget your music. You haven't forgotten all those lessons you had down Sydney way?"

"Rather not!" Ursula beamed. "Once get me on to the keyboard, and I'll keep you all quick and lively. I won't forget. Someone shall bring the stack of music along. Isobel, you might recollect to do that."

Isobel bowed; and the good-looking young man, with a friendly nod, mounted his horse and rode away into the fast-falling dusk.

"How far has he to go?" she asked, glad of an opportunity of opening a conversation with Ursula on more friendly lines.

To her relief the other was far too excited to remember her swift burst of animosity.

"A matter of sixty miles, thereabouts, back to Clarke's Run. My, Isobel, there's something of a station if you like! No pokey shack like this, with fifty square miles of sheep and pasture land; but a grand homestead, with a billiard-room and thousands of acres, and a million of sheep and cattle combined. Suppose you'll want to go with the rest?"

Isobel began to see a little way beyond the subsiding storm.

"I'll just love to go, even though I don't know a soul there."

Little else was talked of all that evening but the projected jollification, and in the absence of all unpleasant feeling Isobel's fears began to die away.

Long before sunrise all the hands at Henner's Lode were astir, saddling horses and making everything ready for the long journey.

Isobel viewed the preparations with girlish delight.

The experience was something quite new to her—a whole station making holiday. A little after six, as soon as breakfast was over and the things cleared away, the party set off, Isobel on a roan mare, with Ursula's music strapped behind her saddle.

In the clear sunlight of early morning they passed busy back blocks, to which a single track line ran, and here big, loose-limbed men were hard at work trucking cattle for all they were worth.

Isobel watched everything with glowing eyes.

"My, they do work here!" she said, with a smile, as Strong drew rein by her side. "Back in England half the folk would still be in bed."

Jim laughed.

"That's the Australian way—to get the day's work through as soon as possible, and then go on the spree. I wonder how you'll like your new life."

Isobel shot him a searching glance from under her sweeping dark lashes.

"I like it already," she answered very slowly, and allowed her sparkling eyes to take in the vast spaciousness. "I like the freedom, but I'm not yet quite used to all your ways."

"I hope you'll get to understand them, although perhaps your beginning has not been as happy as it might be. I feared from the very start you might meet trouble over young Ursy. Still, perhaps you'll settle down with her, and everything'll go all right."

"We shan't have any of those first misunderstandings over again, I'm sure," Isobel admitted, colouring furiously. "You must have thought me an awful prig to fire up as I did, but, really, I was very angry over the way you all spoke of me—especially you, Mr. Strong."

"Especially me!" Jim flicked the ears of his horse with the end of his stockwhip. "You're quite right. I was more'n a bit of a beast to say what I did. But,

there, perhaps you'll let me down lightly as I'm going away."

The little cavalcade had drawn some distance ahead, and only the wild desolation of the bush, with salt scrub dotted here and there, was witness to her amazed surprise.

"Surely that quarrel is ended. You can't really mean to throw up your living, and to leave because of me."

Jim's square jaw snapped.

"I mean to leave, but not because of you," he said, drawing rein again.

"Then why are you leaving?" she asked with remarkable suddenness, settling herself once more in her saddle. "You didn't think of leaving before I came."

"Didn't I?" answered Jim evasively.

"No, you didn't. You told me as we came from the station together how happy you were here, how much you liked the life, and hoped I'd like it, too. Now, isn't all I say correct?"

The stockman looked flustered.

"Well, it is and it isn't. Something's happened since then to make me change my mind. I decided last night I was tired of the bush, tired of living on an up-country station, sick to death of Brant, and fed up with the loneliness of my own existence. There, Miss Grey, now you know all. In a month's time Henner's Lode sees me no more."

On Isobel's lovely face a look of gloom began to settle. Though she had rejected with scorn his crude offer and avowal of love, Strong alone of them all on Brant's station had shown her real kindness.

"Mr. Brant'll be most sorry to lose you," she ventured.

A mocking laugh broke from Jim, and his finely cut lips curved into a sneer.

"We know each other a bit too well, Miss Grey. You don't understand Phil as I do. He'll never forgive me for what I said about young Ursy. Besides, I took his notice, and I'd never be able to hold up my head again in Australia if I went back on my word. Crawling home for the job, they call it, and there's not a man with any self-respect can think of doing it."

Isobel spurred the roan into a canter.

"Of course you know your own business best," she admitted ruefully. "But I wouldn't hide from you or anyone that I feel the whole rumpus was over me."

"Not at all, Miss Grey. The fires between me and Brant were there all the time, just smouldering, and only waiting for the spark to set them into flame. How it come, whether through you, or young Ursy, or Pat Ryan, or Jack Sullivan, don't make no difference. It come, and I can't say as I'm sorry."

He began to whistle then, and Isobel stared in amaze. Only yesterday morning he had sworn in his rough way that he loved her. And yet now he talked of going as though it were the best joke in the world. Of course, she didn't care a straw whether he stayed or went, except that she couldn't help feeling she was, somehow, at the root of all the trouble.

"I'd rather go myself than you should throw up your job," she said, breaking in on his whistling with a suddenness which surprised him. "When we get to Squatter Clarke's I shall tell Mr. Brant I want to go away."

Jim's huge hand came to rest on the roan's bridle.

"You'll do nothing of the kind. What I choose to do is no business of yours——"

"Nor what I do any business of yours!" she flung back hotly. "If I want to leave Henner's Lode I'm perfectly at liberty to do so."

Jim looked her steadily between the eyes.

"You've yourself to think of—the future. Homes as good as Brant's aren't easy to find. You might go many leagues and fare worse. With a man who knows his trade it don't matter much. I'm as well off, perhaps better, up in Queensland as I am down here. Besides, I've a bit of money put by, and that makes all the difference."

Isobel pulled her wandering thoughts together. After the loneliness and the unhappiness of the past few days she certainly would find some satisfaction in being gay again. Here, an hour before noon, a halt was called, and, after the horses had been hobbled, they made tea and ate johnny cakes, while Pat was all for making a long stay to cook a turkey which he had shot.

The twilight fell, as it always does, with strange suddenness, and the stars began to peep out rapidly and to twinkle in a vault of fast deepening blue by the time the welcome lights of the Clarke homestead shone ahead and called them in to the warmth and comfort of crackling wood fires.

Billy greeted the new-comers with a yell from the veranda, and, after gripping each hand warmly in turn, made a swift dive for the stack of music tied behind Isobel's saddle.

"You'll understand how we long for a bit of music, Miss Grey, when I tell you that a note hasn't been struck in this house since our last big do five years ago. Now, come along in, and mother will take you to your room!"

Isobel followed him, and for several seconds stood blinking dazedly in the glare from a score of lights which filled the vast hall and spacious rooms with strong radiance. This was something quite new and unexpected, this grand home hidden far away from civilisation in the heart of the bush. In the dining-room an immense table of rosewood, exquisitely carved and turned, bore

the snowiest of cloths glittering with silver and fine glass, and around this wealthy squatter and plain farm-hand would gather side by side, true members of the finest democracy in the world.

Jim explained everything to her as they wandered through the great rooms after the luxury of a bath and a change of clothes.

"People do everything so different here from what they do in England," he explained. "Clarke has five daughters—fine strapping girls whose manners would grace any country house in England. If music has been denied them breeding hasn't, and when they gather round their father at the table you'll say five finer-looking young ladies couldn't be seen anywhere."

Isobel arched her brows in mild surprise. She had never thought Strong capable of thinking or talking like this.

"But where are they now—why haven't they appeared?"

"Because, Miss Grey, they're far too busy in the kitchen. If you could go down now, you'd find them all in blue print overalls with sleeves turned up, doing menial jobs just as a batch of servants would do in England. And then, when all is ready, they'll nip upstairs, and be just the last thing in daintiness. I know, because I've been here twice before. Hark! That's Ursy doin' thet upright grand a bit of good, while Nettie Clarke is putting the last touch of brown to Pat Ryan's turkey."

He stood with his fine head aside, and his ears astrain, to catch every note of the jerky song which Ursula Brant was strumming.

"I like to hear thet music; it calls back some of my boyhood days," he said, with a curiously longing note creeping into his voice, so that the last word trembled almost to nothingness. "She's singing a song about the old homeland—the homeland I'll never see. And

yet, Miss Grey, often, very often, through the long silence and the utter loneliness I've heard it calling me. Come, we'll go in ! "

Isobel felt a lump rising in her throat. What primitive children these big men were—so childlike and natural with all their roughness shorn away by the gentle appeal of a few simple words set to the lilting tune of a familiar refrain. Ursula had ceased to thump and was doing her best with a melody familiar to Isobel from her earliest years. She drew up suddenly, with one hand on her white throat, for Ryan and Sullivan were both singing lustily, and their coarse, bearded faces were moist with tears. But for all that they kept on, until everyone in the big gathering joined in the chorus, and the throbbing strains joined them in fancy to another land across the world.

It was Billy who asked Isobel if she could play when the many courses of the dinner were through.

Isobel assented modestly enough.

There was a loud chorus of clapping as Isobel took her seat at the piano. She expected music, but there wasn't a sheet which Ursula hadn't tackled with more or less success. So she just allowed her small white hands to wander over the keyboard, and where the light touch rested the most exquisite melody filled the big room.

" It's a little touch of heaven, to be sure ! " muttered Pat, leaning back and closing his eyes. " I'd rayther die listening to that than be buried in owld Oireland, bedad ! Miss Grey, it's yerself is carrying us away entoirely ! Wud you be so plased as to play it agen ? "

And again and again it was played, with the hour growing late and every minute taking on fresh pleasures in such sweet harmony. Poor Isobel, how her hands and eyes and arms ached, as they crowded round her and begged and prayed her to keep on, until at last the

first faint flush of dawn began to peep in through the tops of the windows.

For two whole days a feast of pleasure was kept up at Murrawonga, and no girl ever received half so much flattery and gratitude for her singing and playing as Isobel did then. She accepted it modestly enough.

CHAPTER IV

FACE TO FACE WITH DEATH

THE first cold breath of disaster came within a few minutes of their return to Brant's station at Henner's Lode. All the way back Isobel had noticed how the men left Ursula, and, despite her entreaties, crowded round her and tried to get her to sing some of the songs even as she rode.

Isobel was up in her bedroom taking off her riding clothes when the shock burst with the startling swiftness of a thunder-clap.

Ursula seemed to be making a most unnecessary clatter with the tea-things. Suddenly Phil Brant's voice broke in on the noise.

"Now, Ursy, what's the trouble?" Isobel heard him ask, in rough but not unkindly tones.

"Trouble! I'll tell you what's the trouble!" the girl cried, punctuating each word by hurling a plate or a saucer to the floor. "The time has come, Phil, when you've got to choose what you'll do!"

"Choose what I'll do? What d'ye mean?"

"I mean, I'm fair fed up—that's what I am!" Ursula shrilled, her cheeks crimsoning, and her eyes blazing like twin stars. "It's that girl—the hired girl! We've bin away for four days, four long days, and you and all the rest have enjoyed yourselves—every minute of every hour."

"And ain't you? Didn't you come as well?"

"Me?" she scoffed, sweeping the table clear with one rush of her strong arm. "I've got the evil one in me, and it's the hired girl that has raised it. I hate her—

hate her! I wish she were dead—dead at my feet! The hands don't want me any more since she's come. Now, Phil, you've got to choose! If Isobel Grey stays on this station I go—once and for all. I'll give you just five minutes to make up your mind which you'll lose—her or me. Unless you pack her about her business I'm off to Sydney in the morning."

"Off to Sydney in the morning? Don't talk rubbish, Ursy! You'd never be so foolish!"

Phil perched himself on the edge of the nearest packing-case and laughed as though the girl's anger amused him greatly.

Isobel, half divested of her travelling clothes, listened through a throbbing silence.

"So, you don't think I'd do it?" Ursula asked, in shrill tones. "You say I'd be foolish if I did. My word, Phil, you don't understand me! I'd be foolish if I didn't! What girl with any thought for herself, after she's done all the work I have, and been made a pet of by every feller on the station, is goin' to see herself cut-out by a googie-eyed townie? Not me, for one!"

A pipe came to view in the squatter's brown hand.

"Where's the cause o' trouble, anyway? What's the hired girl done?" he asked, as he took a palmful of tobacco from his bag.

Ursula literally hung on his question. Just how he shared or differed from her point of view affected her whole life.

"What's she done? Everything she oughtn't to! She was brought here to work——"

"And she's worked very well."

"Has she? At setting the men against me—yes. But as for being useful—not a bit of it. Girls like her don't come down-under to work; they get to Australia to work off their pink-and-milk complexions on our best boys. As if we haven't good enough women folk of our own. Never can imagine why you wanted her."

Phil drew stolidly at his pipe.

"That question's soon answered. I got into touch with the agency down at Sydney because Lou ain't over strong, and because you was always grumbling that the work was killing you. She came here to help you out a bit."

A mocking laugh left the girl.

"And nicely she's done it. How do we stand at the end of the first ten days? She's quarrelled with Strong, got Cousin Felix pretty nigh killed, put my back up—and you've lost your best man."

"Who?"

"Why, Jim, of course!"

"He'll never go."

"Oh, won't he? You wait and see. Jim's name is 'Walker' at the end of the month. You'll never see him again."

The man muttered under his breath.

"Now, d'you reckon she's bin much use to you?"

Ursula's voice rose to shrill derision, and the man fidgeted under her triumphant glance.

"I admit things look a bit awkward, but they'll straighten out."

"Not unless you do the straightening, and I'm going to see you do," was Ursula's reply, and, holding her arms akimbo on her shapely hips, she took a step nearer her brother and towered aggressively over him. "You heard what I said? In five minutes from the time I spoke, I want your answer. Who's going—me or Isobel Grey?"

Brant stared up with a helpless sort of look into the angrily-glowing face.

"Why don't you bury the hatchet and agree to be good pals? I'm sure she's done her best."

"Yes—to upset everybody. Anyway, she's fair given me the needle and if you want me to stay, out she goes"

Brant hung his head and studied the pattern of the much-worn rug.

"It'll be mighty awkward——" he began. But Ursula cut him short with an exclamation of anger.

"Look here, d'you think I'm talking to you, Phil, just because I like to hear myself speak? If so, you're mistaken. I'm talking straight—dead straight. My mind was made up on the way home. I couldn't bear to see all the men hanging round her, admiring her, 'cos she's got what they call 'taste.'"

Brant looked up.

"I can't help the men admiring her," he said doggedly.

"Yes, you can," came the flashing answer. "By sending her away!"

"And suppose I refuse?"

"You wouldn't dare."

"Why not? Ain't I the boss here?"

"No; Lou is. You wouldn't dare run against her. And then, you'd have me against you."

"You?"

"Yes, me, who runs the inside of this station as it ought to be run. Now then, Phil, my boy, what's it to be?"

She strode off to the veranda with a jauntiness and a swing to her broad shoulders which showed plainer than any words that in this matter, at any rate, she didn't mean to be trifled with or to retract a single inch from the position she had taken up.

"I'm sure I don't know what to do," came from the man in an uncertain voice.

Ursula jerked her head round and spoke over her shoulder, showing a wisp of straw between her even, white teeth.

"You very quickly will—inside of a minute from now. Four of the five are already gone. You've got just sixty seconds to decide."

"It's very hard on the girl; she's come thousands of miles for this place."

A loud and emphatic stamp of Ursula Brant's foot preceded her answer.

"I don't care a rap about the girl, or how far she's come. That's her look-out, not mine. All I know is, that unless she's out of the station by the end of this week, I pack my traps and strike for Sydney."

Phil took his pipe from his lips, but was careful to keep one eye on the clock.

"I'd have to pay her money—money for nothing—and it would come very hard on me. You know last year we had the drought, and the year before that the weed. I was looking to this season to pull round a bit."

Ursula came back into the middle of the room, and now her small eyes were sparkling wickedly.

"If it's the cash as is worrying you, don't pay me anything for a couple of months. I'd rather put in a spell without wages than have that doll-faced baby about the place. There, that settles it; the five minutes are up. Have you decided?"

Brant rose and moved heavily towards the door.

"Yes, I'll let her go," he muttered unsteadily. "Though there'll be an awful row when Lou hears."

"Never mind Lou; just leave her to me. When are you going to tick her off?"

"In the morning."

"Good! Then place me for a front seat straightway. Trust me for getting a bit of my own back." And a harsh burst of laughter floated out on to the calm air of evening.

The ring of satisfaction in it brought Phil Brant wheeling round with a swiftness of decision he had not hitherto shown.

"No, you don't, young woman," he said, fixing his sister-in-law with a steely glare. "The worst that'll

happen to Miss Grey is that she'll lose this job, and perhaps tumble into a better. As for your getting a chance to bait her, it won't come off."

Ursula raised her flaming face.

"And why won't it come off, pray?" she asked with a sneer.

Brant spread his huge hands on the table, and leant towards her.

"Because, although you've forced me to get rid of her, I shall do my best to treat her properly. D'you think, because I'm rough and uncouth, I haven't got a heart? D'you think I'd stand by and see you gloating over her misfortune? I tell you, Ursy"—bringing his closed fist down with a tremendous bang on the table—"I'd see you at the bottom of Sydney Harbour first!"

A burst of hysterical laughter, followed by a sobbing moan, was the only answer Ursula Brant vouchsafed to Phil's threat. And upstairs, Isobel stood like a figure of stone, wondering how she would escape from the mesh of trouble which fate had wound about her life.

Of course, there was only one way, she decided, when the turmoil of surprise and indignation had had time to subside. Very deliberately she put on her house-dress and went to the task of preparing the men's supper.

They were a very jolly, good-humoured crowd that night. Isobel would remember the occasion as long as she lived—Jim gravely solicitous and kind, Sullivan loudly appreciative of her musical talents, Ryan enthusiastic over her rendering of an Irish folk song, Mrs. Brant studiously kind as usual, the squatter politely attentive, and only Cousin Felix and the ill-natured Ursula showing in their faces the hostility with which they regarded her.

Soon after eleven the gathering broke up, and the men ambled off to their quarters. Isobel spent a few minutes tidying up before going to her bedroom. Once there, she drew a chintz-covered box to the open window

and sat on it, watching the blue night and the countless myriads of stars until long after the last sounds in the station had died to silence.

"They mean to be kind, all of them except Ursula and Felix," she reflected. "But, somehow, I can't get to understand or appreciate them. And I shall go away without a regret—without a single regret."

For an hour she worked ceaselessly, packing her own belongings in the smallest possible space, and hanging away the house-clothes Mrs. Brant had lent her, so that everything in the room should be just as it was when she came. At last it was done.

With a sigh of infinite relief she went to her favourite station by the window, and waited for the night to drag its course away. Two o'clock—three—four! How unutterably long and weary was the time of waiting. Freedom, spaciousness, the wide arms of all Australia were waiting to receive her. Why dally longer with chance?

She put on her boots, and without a sound lowered her single dress-case, the repository of all her possessions, by a length of rope to the ground. Then, knotting the line to the door-handle and about the posts of the bedstead, she bent her weight upon it, and, after a careful testing, made a safe descent.

In one of the sheds a dog barked, and a man's rough voice checked it to silence. Isobel stood stock-still with her heart on her lips. More than anything, she dreaded discovery—for discovery meant a premature triumph for the girl who had caused all the trouble.

However, she reached the home paddock in safety, and, under a full moon, found little difficulty in keeping to the rough track which ran fairly straight through the heart of Brant's run.

"The way seemed long and wearisome when Mr. Strong brought me in the buggy," she reflected at the end of a couple of hours, when the first long arms of

rich warm colour flung themselves against the opal sky. "I reckon I shall be dead sick of it before I get to the train. Ah, thank Heaven, here comes the sun, and in a little time I shall be warm."

An appalling loneliness began to settle on Isobel. When planning her flight she had never dreamed it would take so long to reach the railway. She had conjured notions of a friendly breakfast, and perhaps an hour—or, at the most, two—of inaction till the carriages drew away from the primitive platform. Instead, after all this tiring journey, she seemed still as far off the end as ever.

She had embarked on her expedition heedlessly. She herself admitted it long before the day was through.

The watch on her wrist showed the hour of two, when she sat down for the second time—not, as before, in the restful shade of a tree, with scrub and wattle, and bushes and towering trees offering shelter to tired limbs and sun-strained eyes, and the soft murmuring of the stream sounding deliciously cool as it splashed and gambolled in its bed; but out in the open, the central and only outstanding figure in a waste whose boundaries seemed like the edges of the world.

The burning rays beat with terrific force down on her, smothering her with suffocating insistence. Not a blade of the short parched grass stirred, nor, listen as she might, could she catch the faintest sigh of wind.

All was still, horribly still.

"If only I could see cattle, or a passing stockman, I shouldn't feel quite so desperately lonely," she decided, as she wiped her scarlet face with an already saturated handkerchief. "As for a drink of cool water, or a wash, that would be just the most delicious thing in all the world."

In a little while she gave up thinking about the water, it was too tantalising; for the more she thought about

it, the more did her thirst assert itself. Instead, she began to reflect hopefully.

"Some time during the afternoon a waggon and horses, a timber team, or a shepherd will appear on the skyline. He is sure to see me, and will tell me the way to the station. With good fortune I shall be in Sydney to-night after all."

Sydney! Of course, that started a new train of picturesque imaginings. She could see shops, shops crowded with the daintiest of feminine delights, and even though she possessed no means to indulge her fancies, she would extract a very great deal of pleasure from just looking into them.

"I shall be able to get work somewhere. And the very first thing I'll do when I get there is to buy something to drink."

Something to drink! It was curious that this idea should for ever be intruding upon her thoughts. Something to drink! Was she really so thirsty as all that? She did not think so, though, to tell the truth, her throat was becoming curiously hard and tight, and some times a little stab of pain would take her behind the tongue.

Something to drink! How foolish! The words themselves were written quite clearly in the sun-baked earth. She started, leaning forward on her dress-case. No! The words had vanished, and in their place was a single one—water!

For a long time she watched it, fascinated, till with a sudden grip on her mind she pulled herself together and looked around.

"I cannot escape the horrid word; it's hateful! I seem to see it everywhere, with all the letters dancing and jumping in the hot air. No. This won't do at all."

With this she began to move about, first in a little circle, then sweeping farther and farther afield, till her case was only a tiny black speck against a curtain of

brown, and over all was the glowing haze that quivered from a sky that shone like molten gold.

Five o'clock. The day was passing. She stood on a tiny hummock, shading her eyes with her hands.—

Would no one come? She must go back for the luggage, but the distance frightened her. It looked so far away, miles and miles through a pulsing haze of heat.

"I must rest," was the decision she came to, and, heedless of any danger, threw herself face downwards on the cracked earth and buried her face in her arms. But the earth, like the sky and the air, was hot, so she took off her light jacket and, rolling it into a pillow, lay down again. And this time exhaustion overcame her, and she slept.

When Isobel awoke night had come. It was dark, desperately dark, she thought, as she sat up with a shudder of dread; but gradually her aching eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom, and one by one she made out the sheen and glint of stars like gold spangles against an azure curtain.

"Goodness, how desperately weak I feel!" she muttered, struggling to her feet, for everything was spinning round, and a throbbing, like the faint beat of countless wings, was in her ears. "Still, in the cool of the night I can walk, and when the moon comes up I shall be able to find my way—back to Henner's Lode."

She walked till she was tired, without coming in sight of her dressing-case. Not that it mattered very much, for the time being, whether she found it or not. It contained little enough of value—just a few changes of light clothing, some letters of her mother, a Bible, a Prayer-book, and one or two photographs, links with the life in England which she was severed from for ever.

"I wonder what Lord Markworth would think and say of me if he could see me now?" she asked, with an hysterical little laugh. "I don't suppose I look either

young or beautiful. I wonder when someone will come ? ”

That was the burden of her thoughts as she watched, wild-eyed and staring, the uprising of the sun, and welcomed as she had done the previous morning the first warm rays stealing behind the grey mist of night.

Now hunger added its quota of torture to the cravings of thirst. Towards noon, when she had wandered many, many weary miles, Isobel's breaking limbs could no longer support her. Very resignedly, without a sigh or a moan, she stretched herself out, and drifted away into sleep.

How long she slept she never knew, but a noise like thunder slowly brought back her senses. She rubbed her eyes and sat up, glancing painfully around.

Yes, there was the noise again—a regular thud, thud like the beating of a hammer proceeding steadily. And then—all the world swam before her staring gaze ; she flung out her arms, and cried aloud for sheer joy to the stars and the uprising moon. A man on horseback, with a second running by his side, was making towards her.

The prayer which her lips had framed and never finished when she lay down to die was finished now.

“ My word, what a chase you've given me ! That's right, just a little more. Now another drain or two. You feel better ? Of course you do. We shall have you right in no time. Who am I ? Look again. You'll soon remember me.”

Isobel came slowly out of a dream maze with the music of a deep, rich voice ringing in her ears. She opened her eyes—closed them almost instantly, and put out one small white hand which the man caught and held close.

“ You recognise me ? ” he asked anxiously.

Isobel nodded, and began to cry softly to herself.

“ Yes. I know you. You are Jim—Mr. Strong. How long have we been here ? ”

"Just about two hours. I brought you across my saddle. We've made camp here, in a sheltered gully. The night is cold; I put my coat on you, because I thought in those thin clothes you'd feel the air. There's a fine fire, and Larry is making tea and johnny cakes. Bless my soul, whatever made you go off like that?"

Isobel did not answer him for several moments, but continued to stare only half comprehendingly into the flickering blaze of pine logs.

"Who's Larry?" she asked after a while.

Jim emitted a soft laugh.

"Larry? Oh, he's the black tracker, 'one of the aborigines, you know. I borrowed him from the next 'run,' when I found you hadn't turned up at the station."

"You guessed I was lost, then?" she asked, glancing shyly up into his strong face.

Jim looked very grave.

"We had nothing else to think. I knew what would happen if you missed the track, so Larry and I got on your trail mighty fast; but it's taken us the best part of thirty hours to find you."

Isobel drank eagerly from the billy before she expressed surprise at the swift passage of time.

"It was brave and good of you—to come so far for me," she said, in a voice which trembled with gratitude. "Just how I shall ever repay you I don't know."

Jim smiled, and heaped more wood on the blaze.

"You mustn't thank me, Miss Grey. The credit is due to Larry entirely. Without him, you would have been lost for sure. By the time Brant, or me, or any of the hands at Henner's Lode found you, you'd have been as dead as the dodo, certain sure."

A grateful light shone in Isobel's eyes.

"I shall never forget either of you—never, never!" she muttered fervently. "But, really, I don't quite understand why you went to such trouble for me."

Again Jim smiled.

"There's not a fellow in all Australia, Miss Grey, who wouldn't have ranged half the continent for a lost woman. However, thank God, we found you; and when you feel rested enough, just tell me, and we'll be all getting back."

A spasm of cold fear contracted Isobel's heart.

"Getting back? Where to?" she asked in an anxious whisper.

"To Brant's station, to be sure. Where else?"

A wave of colour surged into the girl's cheeks, and her lips set in quick, firm lines.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Strong," she answered very quietly but very determinedly. "But, whatever happens, I could never return there."

"Not go back? What's the reason?"

"A reason you wouldn't understand even if I felt well enough to explain. Please don't force me to go over unpleasant ground. There is a very good cause why I should never go back to the station. Show me the way to the railhead, where I can get train for Sydney, and I shall always be grateful to you."

Jim saw how white she was, and instantly his mind was made up.

"I'm sorry, Miss Grey, but I can't oblige you," he said in measured tones. "My way back takes me to Brant's station, and unless you want to be left very much in the same plight you were in when I found you, you've got to make up your mind to pocket your pride and to come with me!"

CHAPTER V

ON DANGEROUS GROUND

ISOBEL could hardly believe the evidence of her own ears.

"I don't take you at all seriously, Mr. Strong," she said, with a laugh which showed how quickly her strength and spirits were returning. "Come, I want to enjoy this lovely tea, and the warmth of the fire, and your society. Later, we can discuss what we will and what we won't do."

Jim seated himself on the far end of a fallen tree trunk, and knocked the bowl of his pipe on the heel of his riding boot.

"Enjoy my society?" he repeated, with a touch of grimness. "I thought that was one of the very things you were most anxious to escape from."

"Circumstances alter one's point of view for the time being," she replied gaily, and watched his sober, grave face over the edge of the tea-cup. "I won't promise you I shall always feel the same, but just at the moment I do feel most desperately grateful to you and Larry for what you've done. Tell me, how did you guess I had lost my way in the bush, and that I was where you found me?"

Jim drew steadily at his briar and poured thick volumes of sweet-smelling tobacco smoke in the direction of the crackling logs.

"One thing followed fast on another, Miss Grey. First I rode to the railhead, and asked of the station-master—well—I asked—where had you booked to? Perhaps I was interested. I don't know. And when

Seth Brandreth said you hadn't showed up or gone by any train, I just opined it was time to be having a look round. We found you, curled up, and lying just peaceful. I guessed for a minute or two we'd come too late."

Isobel sent a ripple of glad laughter far into the night.

"Thanks to you and Larry I'm a long way from being dead. By the way, did you happen to see anything of my dress case?"

Jim ran his hand through his crisp, short hair.

"What dress case? We didn't find no dress case. Did you slip away and take your luggage with you?"

"All I possessed in the world," answered Isobel, looking suddenly sad. "Whatever shall I do? Those things must be found. I've got no clothes, or anything, and every bit of money I possessed—just about enough to take me down to Sydney—was in my purse."

Jim whistled.

"Phew! That's serious—for you. At sunrise I'll get Larry on to it. He's the finest tracker in this part of the back blocks, but I wouldn't give much for the chance of finding a lady's dress case."

"Well, so far as the case is concerned, I quite see that nothing can be done till the morning. But about this going back to Henner's Lode. Of course, you must realise, as a sensible man, it's utterly impossible."

The pipe stem crackled between Jim's strong teeth.

"Why impossible? Aren't you happy there?"

"Happy! I was never more miserable in my life I've come to a decision, Mr. Strong. It's this, that Henner's Lode and I don't ever get on friendly terms again. Now, to put the matter very bluntly, are you, or are you not, willing to help me get to the railway station?"

Jim's eyes were twinkling.

"Supposing I said yes," he said guardedly, "what d'you think would happen when you got there?"

"I should get the first train to Sydney, of course."

Jim was still smiling, though his handsome face was hidden under the wide brim of his soft hat.

"Perhaps you'd go back to England," he suggested tentatively.

"Oh, no; I should never do that. I hope I shall never see England, at least, I should say, for a good many years yet. Now I've told you, perhaps you'll be just as frank with me, and say why you won't help me to the station."

"There are several reasons, Miss Grey. To begin with, I may as well say straight out that the chances against Larry recovering your possessions in this wilderness are about a million to one. Consequently you don't possess the money to take you a single mile down the rail track. That's one thing. The second is, you've got notions about Sydney that won't fit in."

"Why won't they fit in?"—a little note of fear shaking her voice.

"I've told you, Miss Grey—given you the best advice I possess. Go back to Brant's station and make the best of it. If you've quarrelled with Ursula, the storm will soon die down, and in a little while you'll be the best of chums."

The memory of all Ursula had said to the squatter came back in an affrighting flood of recollection.

"Never, never!" she cried vehemently. "I would rather have lain and died where I was in the bush than suffer the humiliation of crawling back there for food and protection."

"I think you heard me say once before," he said, turning his eyes steadily on her, "that out here, living as us rough chaps do, in a great solitude, sometimes we get very, very lonely. Once, a little time ago, a light ray leapt up and I went towards it. But as I neared it, it moved farther and farther away, always beyond me, until at last it went out altogether. Miss Grey—Isobel—I'm trying to tell you, and yet to hide what perhaps you

yourself can see, that the light was you—and I wanted you, God knows, so much! You refused me. But all the time my heart was there, and I knew from the first when my eyes met yours that in all the world, through life—yes, and death and eternity—I should never love another woman! Please, please don't turn away; I'm sorry if I offend or hurt you."

Isobel was looking across to where the black tracker made a blot of darkness against the sage green of the trees.

"You don't hurt or offend. I'm only very, very sorry."

A half audible sigh broke from Jim's tightly compressed lips.

"You asked me a little bit ago what took me yesterday morning up to the station. I was afraid then to tell you; it was to find you, because I knew if you went away I'd never be much of a man again. So I made up my mind to find you—yes, to find you if I rode the length and breadth of the continent. And I did. Why, you're never crying?"

"No, I'm not crying," she said faintly, throwing off the hand which touched her arm. "You're asking me to make you happy, and I'm certain I could never do it."

"And why not?"

"Because I don't love you."

Jim laughed against himself.

"Of course, I know I ain't good enough, not fit to tie the shoe-strings of a lady like you; but I'm strong and willing, and, God knows, I'd slave for you all the days of my life if only you'd let me. I've got money, a tidy little bit of money down in the bank at Walong, and it's yours—yours, every stiver of it."

Still Isobel stared gravely into the fire.

"Because I'm not saying much, don't think I'm ungrateful," she said. "You've done me a great honour, the greatest honour you could offer to any woman,

because every word you utter is sincere. You want me to be the companion of your loneliness, to brighten the darkness of your solitude."

The man stretched out his arms, and the passion of a great earnestness rang in his voice.

"Isobel, as God is my Witness, I love you—aye, and my love is as wide as the heavens and as constant as the stars. You have nowhere to go. Here you are, a stranger in a strange land. Won't you let me give you the comfort and protection of a home?"

In a flash Isobel Grey's mind was made up. All her life long she had acted impetuously, and had been quick to decide.

Her red lips quivered, and she had to force the words from her mouth.

"I've decided," she said, pushing him gently from her. "Take me for what I have to offer, not what you expect of me, and I'll come."

CHAPTER VI

"FOR BETTER—FOR WORSE"

ISOBEL awoke to a new world and to a new life. She rubbed her eyes, sat up, and looked around.

The sun had risen several hours since. A little way off a stream trilled and babbled, a sound refreshingly new after the unbroken silence of the treeless waste that had come nigh to claiming her.

With a little laugh she rose, and, uncoiling her heavy masses of hair, knelt down by the waterside and bathed her face and neck and arms in its delicious coolness, and for the first time since she had set foot in Australia the joy of living ran through her veins.

She began to coil up her wondrous hair with feverish haste as she caught the sound of a man's rich voice lightly carolling the notes of a love song. It was Jim, singing for sheer joy and triumph that he had at last won her.

A little shiver of fear ran through Isobel, and tears started to her eyes.

"I was forgetting. Last night I told him I would marry him." She turned miserably away, and hoped almost against hope that some way to escape would open before her. How foolish she had been!

After less than a month in Australia to promise herself to a fellow she didn't care a straw about! And yet, in the light of cold, calm reason, what could she do? She had no money, no means of getting back to civilisation, and, after all, he had saved her life.

The thought of that brought a smile of gratitude to

her warm, red lips. At least he should never know that the price he had asked was too great.

With a light step, and trying to still the dread at her heart, Isobel, who had finished her toilet and looked more alluringly lovely than ever, walked rapidly towards the open.

On the brown earth of the clearing a fire crackled and hissed merrily, and from a tripod of stout sticks the billy hung steaming in the blaze.

Jim made some effort at manners as the girl approached.

"Morning, Isobel," he said, removing his pipe from his lips and lifting his wideawake. "Your breakfast is ready. Larry will serve it while I look to the horses."

"But you—aren't you going to have any with me?" she asked.

Strong showed his perfect white teeth in a smile.

"My dear girl, Larry and me fed three hours since. I wouldn't wake you. I knew you'd be dog-tired, and we've a tidy-sized journey to put up to-day. Get along now, and enjoy native cooking. I must look to the mares."

Ah, how delicious the johnny cakes tasted! And the tea! She had never drunk such delicious tea in all her life. Everything was perfection that came from Larry's black hands in the cooking line, and Isobel, with a sudden move of regret, wished with all her heart that Jim and she had never struck their strange bargain.

"But for his wanting to get married, I'd be the happiest girl alive," she reflected. "But there, what's the good of repining now it's too late? He saved me from a dreadful fate, and if I don't marry him I'll have to go back to Brant's station and live goodness knows how many years of my life with Ursula. Ugh! That would be just worse than death. Mr. Strong," raising her clear young voice so that it reached Jim on the far side of the clearing, "can you spare me a few moments? I want to talk to you badly."

Jim laughed outright, and tossed his hat on the ground.

" Ah, that's something like. You're getting sensible. I want you to feel that I'm not quite such a monster as you thought last night. How d'you feel, my dear, about what we settled ? "

Isobel bit her under-lip.

" That's what I wish to discuss with you. What do you propose to do ? " she questioned, smothering her emotions carefully.

Jim thoughtfully lit his pipe.

" Do ? There's only one thing to do, lass, and that's to make you my wife without delay. What's the use of wasting time ? I want you for a wife, mighty badly, too, and you want a home. Them are the bare facts, so why blink about it ? You don't cotton on to going back to Brant's, I guess ? "

A spot of colour showed in each cheek as Isobel tossed her head.

" Not for worlds ! I'd rather marry you than return there," she said, forcing a laugh. " I wouldn't show myself at Henner's Lode again for all the gold in New South Wales."

It cost her more than he ever realised to make that admission. She was penniless, without food or means in a strange land, and because of her helplessness he had bought her.

" Finish your meal, Isobel, and one of the horses will be waiting for you. Larry will find his way back at a loping trot to his master's station. You and I are going straight down to Walong."

" To Walong ! What, now ? " she asked blankly.

" For sure ; and why not ? We've got to be made man and wife, and we've got to put in some time afore the parson can do it as residents in the town, unless you want me to bust the money on a special licence."

It was on the tip of Isobel's tongue to say that she wasn't quite so anxious, but she checked the impulse.

"You mean we'll have to stay at an hotel or something?"

"Or in apartments. It don't matter much which. Mr. Lisle—he's the sky-pilot, you know—'ll tell us what to do."

A glad smile irradiated Isobel Grey's sadly beautiful face.

"Mr. Lisle! Oh, I know him. I shall just love meeting him again!" she cried, and clasped her small hands together at the thought of this link with a friend.

Jim eyed her steadily, and a suspicious note sounded in his deep voice.

"You know the parson?" he asked. "Was he a friend of yours in England?"

"No, I met him on the boat. He was very kind to me, that's all."

Jim nodded and walked away.

"Good! Then I'm ready when you are. You ought to be glad you're not seeing young Ursy Brant any more."

Isobel followed him, and allowed him to help her into the saddle and to arrange her dress.

"I am more glad than I can say. And Jim"—dropping her soft voice to a whisper—"I'll do my best to make you a good wife."

"I'm sure you will," the stockman replied, watching Larry packing up the last of the camp clobber. "And what's more, I'll swear no husband in all Australia'll be half so proud of his bride as I shall be. Say, Isobel, you're a real lovely woman."

The girl laughed.

"I'm nothing of the kind. You're looking at everything now, and especially at me, through rose-coloured glasses."

She waved good-bye to the camp, and fell in at his side.

In a very few minutes they had set their steeds at a

gallop, and soon the watered gully was but a dark blur against the sweltering skyline.

He did not speak again for quite a long time after that, and through all that morning they rode with unabated speed towards the township. At length the bare plain gave place to the soft outlines of a fertile and splendidly cultivated valley, where farming in all its branches thrived wonderfully, and in the distance gold-diggers woke the breathless quiet of the mountain gullies.

Jim drew rein and pointed with his riding-crop.

"That's Walong, lassie, built on mud flats which ought to have been tilled as farm land," he explained. "Result, all that lovely but useless green. Half an hour from now we'll be there."

Almost to the minute they gained the broad streets, pleasantly shaded with rows of trees, giving a sense of retirement and restfulness after the pitiless glare of the open bush-land.

Isobel drew an almost happy sigh.

"I had no idea Walong was such a big place!" she exclaimed. "I see there's a park and a cricket ground, with a bandstand."

"And, what's more important still so far as you and me are concerned, a church," said Jim. "Still, you may as well have as good a time as you can while you're here, because when we're back at our own shack life won't be quite so gay."

"I hope it'll be full of hard work," Isobel replied.

"First the marriage; we'll talk about work later. Now I guess if you stay here with Nell, I'll canter round a bit, and see what I can find in the way of lodgings."

He helped her out of the saddle, and left her standing at the corner, the meeting-place of Walong's four main roads. Then, waving his hat, he rode off.

She passed the time in gently caressing the beautifully

groomed mare, till a hand was laid upon her shoulders, and she swung round, a scream of terror rising to her lips, for, facing her, was the one man in all the world she dreaded most to see.

"Mr. Fleck!" she muttered, her lips trembling, and as he advanced she drew back, one small hand clasped to her breast.

The man removed a bowler from his shining head, and bowed satirically.

"Jasper Fleck, milady, at your service. What a strange coincidence to meet you here. I take it you didn't reckon on coming face to face with Lord Markworth's secretary quite so soon."

Isobel was fast recovering her composure.

"No, I didn't," she said hotly. "And now you've discovered me, what do you intend doing?"

The man laughed, and showed a double row of uneven teeth.

"Do! There's only one thing to do, what I've come right across the world for, to get hold of you and take you to Lord Markworth." He glanced quickly round, and, seeing the street was deserted, closed a strong grip on her small wrist. "Now, then, you're coming with me."

Isobel began to struggle, but, for all that, he held her in a remorseless grip.

"I'm not! I'm not!" she panted. "You have no power to take me. I'm a free woman, and if you don't let me go I shall call for help, and then you'll be sorry for this."

"Sorry!" Fleck only laughed, and with his free hand seized the mare's bridle. "You don't reckon, after an eight-thousand-mile chase right across the globe, you're going to get away. Not you, my dear! You're going to be a good girl, and marry Lord Markworth, just as your dear father wishes. Now, then, come along. We needn't worry about the horse, because

I've a big car being taken off the train at the station, and in that you're going back to——"

He got no farther, for the silence of the warm summer's evening was shattered by a terrific report, followed by a flash of flame and a vomiting cloud of blue cartridge smoke. Isobel screamed and turned her head, just as Fleck threw up his arms, spun helplessly round, and pitched forward on his face. Ten yards away stood Jim, a smoking pistol gripped in his big right hand.

Isobel's scared glance passed from the prostrate Fleck to the tall, accusing figure of Strong.

"Jim, you've killed him!" she panted, laying her hand fearfully on his arm.

Strong sheathed his weapon and threw off her grip.

"And what if I have? I'd kill any man who dared to lay a hand on you," he said, and strode doggedly towards the form of Fleck, who, grovelling in the dust, writhed with pain. "Now, then, you reptile, get up before I put another bullet in you. Belle, catch that mare; we can't afford to lose her."

Isobel turned half-way to the horse.

"But Mr. Fleck, Jim—you must see to him. He's dangerously hurt. See, people are coming out of their houses. Oh, there'll be such a lot of trouble for you. I know there will, because he's bleeding——"

"Yes, from a bit chipped off the lobe of his ear," rasped the stockman, striding towards the kicking mare. "And if I thought you were going to be silly enough to waste your sympathies on such a worm, I'd have cut off a slice half an inch bigger. Here, take this bridle, girl; that scoundrel has cleared."

Isobel glanced over her shoulder, just in time to see Fleck, with one hand held to his head, vanishing round the nearest corner.

"I'm glad he's not seriously hurt," Isobel said, for the sight of another's suffering was bound to touch her heart. "All the same, it was fortunate you came

when you did. I didn't like the look of the fellow at all."

Jim hooked the bridle over his arm, and motioned to her to fall in at his side.

"You knew him; you called him Fleck," he said, giving her a watchful glance. "How comes it he knew you were in Walong?"

A gleam of apprehension shot flashing lights into Isobel's fathomless eyes.

"I haven't the least idea. The meeting must have been quite accidental. I knew Mr. Fleck in England, but not very well. Why he has come to Australia—oh, please don't question me, because I couldn't possibly explain."

One glance at her resolutely beautiful face decided Jim that the present was not the time to press her for an explanation. To force her to answer against her will might be to lose her altogether.

"We won't worry ourselves any more about Mr. Fleck for the moment," he said, breaking into a light whistle, and flicking the flies with his riding-crop from Nell's glossy flank. "I've found rooms for you, Belle—nice rooms quite near the river—the ground floor for you, and the upstairs for me. There we can stall till the parson makes us man and wife."

Again that curious sensation of fear—of parting for ever with her freedom. The impulse rose to her lips to plead with him, to beg him for pity's sake to let her retract from her part of the bargain.

And then her pride, that wonderful pride which had always swayed her impulsively through life, rose in revolt against the weakness of such a course. She would not—could not—plead with this man to step one inch outside the bargain she had made with him.

"You are very good to me," she said, forcing a light laugh. "I'm sure I shall just love being in Walong, after the loneliness and the desolation of the bush."

Jim looked down on her fondly.

"Now you're talking something like," he said gaily. "And you won't find me ungenerous. This evening, when we've had tea, you're to go out and visit the store, and just pick out all your wants in the way of clothes."

Isobel reddened with confusion and stopped suddenly dead.

"Oh, Jim, I can't! I simply can't let you spend a penny piece on me before we're married."

At that Jim stopped too, and eyed her from head to foot.

"Now look here, Belle, them notions have got to go. This is a serious job, coming into the township and staying for the purpose of getting spliced. When it's over, and the knot is tied, we'll have to 'skedaddle back to the sheep and the shearing and the farming for all we're worth. There'll be no time for fuddlin' round after clothes then. Besides, I thought you'd just enjoy going round and picking up all them frill-fralls what women love."

His boyish simplicity brought a laugh from her.

"So I shall. What girl wouldn't, after she's had to dress as I have since I came out, and hasn't seen a single shop? Oh, I promise you I'll make your cash fly!"

She didn't really mean anything of the kind, but she felt that to take an interest in his proposals was the surest way of sinking all differences between them.

"I'll not grumble," he answered, allowing his glance to rest admiringly on her fresh young loveliness. "You're the finest-looking girl in all Australia, and Jim Strong would never lift up his head among his pals if he couldn't give his wife what she wanted. Here we are; what d'you think of these for digs, eh?"

He stopped before a wooden-fenced garden, bright with flowers, that sloped away to green undulations

bounded by the sparkling river, beside which trees grew and peaches flourished abundantly.

Isobel drew in a breath of delight.

"It's exquisite, deliciously wonderful!" she murmured. "I feel as though I should like to stay here always."

A smile of deep satisfaction settled on the young stockman's face. At last he had done something to please her. After seeing the mare stabled and groomed beside his own, he washed and brushed away the traces of the long journey, and joined Isobel in the pretty sun-bathed room.

Here the most delicious of meals was spread, and Isobel, thoroughly hungry after the long ride, did full justice to the good fare.

As soon as tea was over, Jim rose, and putting on a cigar—a luxury Isobel had never known him indulge in before—joined her at the window.

"Now, you are to go out and look round the town while I nip along for a talk with the sky-pilot. I want to see what can be done about this wedding," he explained.

Isobel looked up into his happy, glowing face. It was on her lips to suggest that he should come too, but remembering the spasm of jealousy he had shown over Fleck, and feeling she would rather be alone when it came to buying clothes, she remained silent.

"All right, Jim; you go along and find Mr. Lisle. I'll do the shopping."

"And mind you buy everything you want," he flung back from the doorway. "I'll arrange, as I go down the town, for you to pledge my credit up to a total of thirty pounds."

Isobel thanked him and smiled to herself as the front door slammed. Thirty pounds. Big, simple-hearted Jim! She wondered what he would have thought had he known that the abandoned trousseau for her

projected wedding to Lord Markworth had cost her father well over five hundred pounds. And in his generosity he was telling her she might spend up to thirty.

"But I'll not waste a penny," she decided, as she went to her room upstairs and tidied her hair. "He shall have good value for his money—such as befits a hard-working stockman's wife."

A stockman's wife! How the words ran in her brain!

"And yet," she told herself, with a half-satisfied laugh, "I believe he will learn to really care if I strive to please him, and once we get to understand each other, life won't be so dreadful after all. He is giving so much; I, nothing," she reflected, with a bitter pang. "In a little while the wedding-day will come, and I shan't have even a little wedding present for my husband."

Her husband! The very notion was ludicrous, yet sincerely real. He was to be her husband; no power on earth could alter that, neither Fleck, her father in England, nor Lord Markworth. And as he was to be her husband she must give him something.

She stopped outside a brightly illuminated window. Her hand went to her breast. Beneath her dress, hung by a thin gold chain, was something she must sacrifice—for him. Yes, she would sell it, the only treasure she possessed, and buy him a wedding present.

In a few quick strides she was in the shop holding out the thing of pearls and gold. A little jeweller stood behind the glass-topped counter.

"I want you to tell me how much you are prepared to give me for this," she said, trying hard to conceal the break in her voice.

The man screwed a glass into his eye.

"It is valuable, this cameo set with pearls," he said. "Do you wish me to buy the painting, too?"

Isobel shook her head, and her glance rested longingly on the face of her dead mother. "Only the pearls and the gold," she answered slowly.

The man tested the metal with acid.

"I can allow you fifteen pounds," he said. "It's worth five-and-twenty, but I may have to break it up to see my money back. Will you take fifteen pounds?"

Isobel nodded.

"Yes, I'll take the amount out in goods," she answered, "I want a gentleman's half-hunter watch. Will you please show me some?"

Isobel's eyes danced with pleasure as the obliging little jeweller laid out on a tray a number of handsome timepieces. At length she selected one to her satisfaction, and taking it with her, in a neat leather-bound case, she left the shop and retraced her steps to the lodgings. To her surprise Jim had anticipated her. He was already in the front room, anxiously waiting her return.

Hardly giving her time to enter the room he rushed forward, and, seizing her hands, dragged her over the threshold.

"Oh, Belle, I'm just mad with joy," he said with boyish enthusiasm. "I've seen Lisle, and we're to be married by special licence as soon as he can get one from the Bishop of New South Wales."

Isobel allowed her hands to rest for an instant in his strong big ones. Then her heart began to beat very rapidly, as all the old fears began to return now that marriage was drawing so near.

"And about when will that be?" she asked in a voice that sounded unreal and far away.

Jim laughed gaily.

"At the outside not more than a week from now," he said. "Isobel, you're going to be my wife. I want you, my heart longs for you. I'm going to kiss you right now," and, taking her up in an embrace from which there was no escape, he imprinted kiss after kiss on her passionless unresponsive lips.

CHAPTER VII

THE GREAT SURRENDER

ISOBEL stood in the hot morning sunshine by the little green-painted fence enclosing a veritable blaze of fragrant flowers, waiting for Jim to appear.

It was her wedding-day! Nothing more prosaic could possibly be imagined. In the long, tree-shaded street facing the Walong River the sun-blinds were down and scarce anybody stirred.

In the yard at the back of the house, where a number of horses were stabled, she could hear Jim whistling gaily, a sign of great good humour. Soon she caught the splashing of water and a sight of Jim performing his ablutions in the cold stream that spurted from the wall tap.

"Shan't be a minute," he called cheerily. "Just got to get my coat."

Isobel stared and went back to the gate. Surely he wasn't thinking of going to the church in his rough everyday clothes! But that was exactly Jim's intention, for a few moments later he appeared with a much-worn wideawake hat pulled well down over his face, and a pipe sticking out from the corner of his mouth, lumbering heavily down the path.

"I'd no idea time was slipping on so," he said with a laugh. "Them sky-pilots don't like bein' kept waiting. Still, we'll jest about do it; he said eleven, and it wants about five minutes off the hour."

At this the girl stopped suddenly dead, and looked at him aghast.

"But I thought when you left me at half-past nine you had gone to get dressed?"

A look of blank astonishment came over Jim's face.

"Well, ain't I dressed? What's the matter with me, anyway? I've got me full complement o' togs on, coat, breeches, a neck wrap—I put that on to please you—boots, gaiters, and a hat. What more d'you want?"

Isobel frowned.

"But, Jim, this is your wedding-day. You ought to have dressed up a bit, put on Sunday clothes——"

"Me put on Sunday clothes?" The ring of laughter which he gave could have been heard a hundred yards away. "For one thing, I haven't got any; and for another, if I had, I shouldn't waste time decking myself out just to pay a visit to a sky-pilot. No! Don't you worry, Belle, I'm all right, but I guess I'll have to shove this away till the ceremony's through."

As he spoke he took his pipe from his lips, and knocked out the ashes on the heel of his riding boot.

Isobel began to feel more than a little ill at ease.

"How long is it, Jim, since you were in a church?" she asked anxiously.

Jim screwed up his eyes and studied the blue sky.

"Me? In a church? Let me see. A matter of sixteen or seventeen year, I suppose. You see, churches ain't so plentiful as apples, way up in the back blocks, and as the parson can't bring the church to us, we have to wait till we can get along to it, which isn't very often, give you my word!"

Isobel felt the need of a discreet warning.

"We shall both have to be very serious and very quiet," she suggested. "Of course, marriage is a very serious matter."

The stockman ran his hand round the back of his head, and replaced the empty pipe between his lips.

"I suppose it is. All the same, I hope the old pilot

won't be long about it. Now, Belle, smile and look happy, and say good-bye to your single name."

A lump rose in Isobel Grey's throat. The reality was altogether so different from the romantic dreams of girlhood. Many and many a time when at school she had pictured the crowning event of a woman's life, the coming into it of her dream hero, the fashionable wedding, the gay honeymoon. Instead, a little galvanised iron building, surmounted by a plain wooden cross and a tiny superstructure carrying a harsh-toned bell.

The church cleaner and the verger, who were to act as witnesses, already occupied seats at the back. They rose as Isobel, leaning on Jim Strong's arm, passed up the narrow aisle. Only a moment's waiting, when, with calm and dignified mien, the clergyman appeared from the vestry, and took up his position on the chancel steps. He raised his eyes from the open book in his hand; Isobel met the kindly glance, and a look of pleased recognition passed between them. For the second time Arthur Lisle had come into her life.

To a girl of Isobel's fine feelings, the service was very impressive. She felt the weight of a great responsibility upon her, as the ring was placed upon her finger and her solemn vows had gone up into the keeping of God.

A few short prayers, a little silence, during which she prayed for strength and help in the new life that stretched before her, then, with her small cold hand resting in her husband's, she passed into the vestry and signed the register.

Lisle removed his stole and surplice, and shook hands with each of them.

"With all my heart I wish you every happiness," he said, smiling benignly. "I look upon it as a great privilege, Mr. Strong, that I was the first person to welcome your wife to her new homeland, and I shall

hope wherever you may be, so long as you remain in this diocese, to call on you to renew and strengthen that acquaintanceship."

Jim mumbled something in the nature of thanks very crudely expressed.

Isobel was certainly more direct.

"You will always be welcome, Mr. Lisle. In a very short time we shall be settled in a homestead of our own, and I'm sure nothing will give us greater pleasure than to offer you our hospitality."

"Though we shan't have had much experience in the way of entertaining parsons," chimed in Jim.

At this the minister laughed, and slapped the huge fellow's broad shoulder.

"Never mind, Strong. Like you, when I get out of the town I'm a simple plainsman. Hallo! I've more visitors," as heavy footsteps sounded on the tiled floor of the aisle. "I suppose this can't be another wedding?"

He moved past them, but before he could reach the door it opened, and a tall form stood upon the threshold. His furious glance passed from the clergyman to Jim, and then to Isobel, who at sight of him had started back with fear written on every line of her white face.

"Lord Markworth!" she said in a hushed whisper, and clung to Jim as though in fear.

"Yes, Lord Markworth, your affianced husband, come to put a stop to all this tomfoolery, and to take you home," the new-comer said. "My good man, are you the minister who has been asked to officiate at this ceremony?"

Lisle inclined his grey head.

"Most certainly. This lady is now Jim Strong's wife."

Markworth advanced, and banged his gloved fist heavily on the table.

"Then let me tell you, my good fellow, that she isn't

your wife at all. That girl is a runaway from her father's home ; if she is married, she has married without her father's consent, and the marriage is not lawful."

An angry spot of colour showed in each of Jim's bronzed cheeks.

"Ain't it, though?" said Jim very slowly. "We'll see all about that. She's my wife, and it'll take a better man than you to take her from me."

"But, my dear chap——"

"Don't 'dear chap' me"—turning on the minister.

"Now, parson, is she my wife, or isn't she?"

Lisle smiled encouragingly.

"Of course she's your wife," he began, but Lord Markworth cut him short impatiently.

"She's nothing of the kind. This ceremony has taken place without her father's knowledge and consent. In addition to this she is under age and therefore not in a position to pledge herself in marriage to any man."

Isobel found her tongue at last.

"This is not true. I am over twenty. As for a father's consent, a girl of twenty doesn't need it."

"That is the law," interjected Lisle quietly.

Jim slipped his arm round Isobel and moved towards the door.

"Law or no law, she's mine and I'm going to have her, and what is more, Mr. Lord Markborn or whatever your name is, unless you stand aside, I'll pick you up and throw you through the window."

"Hush!" said the clergyman. "There must be no brawling."

"But there will be when I get outside unless this jackanapes makes himself scarce," roared Jim, allowing one hand to steal swiftly to his hip pocket. "You know what happened to another friend of this young lady's, I don't doubt. He got a bit clipped off his ear; you'll get a bit shot off the top of your skull. Now, stand aside there, because I'm off home."

Markworth didn't stay to give the burly stockman a chance of drawing his weapon; he just moved aside and collapsed, panting and flustered, with the open register shaking in his hands.

Jim picked up the marriage certificate and slipped it in his shirt.

"This is the right to what I've bought." He laughed defiantly. "If you reckon you can take her away from me, just try—that's all."

A minute later he and Isobel, looking very pale and frightened, were out in the warm sunshine.

For a time neither spoke. Both were busy with their thoughts. At last, Isobel looked up with the glance of a frightened child into his stern face.

"I ought to have told you," she began. "You haven't looked at the certificate yet, Jim. When you do you'll find I'm not Isobel Grey at all."

Jim tossed his head and laughed quietly.

"Never mind who you are; you're my wife, and that's enough for me. But that overdressed dandy with his towny ways—I tell you straight, Belle, if he's a sample of your friends way back in the Old Country, I don't want to meet 'em, and if I do, well, there'll be a tidy-sized heap of trouble for them."

Isobel clung to him timidly.

"Are you cross with me, Jim?" she asked in a half-scared whisper.

The cold resolution on Jim's face did not soften.

"I hardly know as yet," he said brusquely. "I've got you, and because of that I'm glad. But you ain't done quite the straight thing in not telling me who you are, and why you run away from home and come out to this country to earn your living as a hired gel."

"I will tell you, I'll tell you everything, if only you'll be kind and patient with me," she answered brokenly. "There were reasons why I could not stay at home, good reasons, and in time you shall know—all."

A laugh left him.

"I'll take pretty good care I do, too. There can't be no secrets between husband and wife, and don't forget it. I've been square, dead square, with you, and I expect you to be the same with me. Now, cheer up, and don't look unhappy."

"But Lord Markworth and Fleck; I fear both of them."

"Are they pals?"

"Well, no; Mr. Fleck is Lord Markworth's confidential servant—secretary he calls himself. I meant to tell you the other day when he stopped me in the street, only I thought you would be very angry with me. Mr. Fleck had been sent on ahead by his lordship to try and find me. I ran away from my father's house because he insisted on my marrying Lord Markworth. He and Lord Markworth have had big business dealings together, and I believe my father owes his lordship a large sum of money. Markworth was willing to cancel the debt if my father could force me into accepting him as my husband. Oh, Jim, I was very unhappy, very miserable! I hadn't anyone to turn to for help or advice. I knew, if I married Lord Markworth, I should only take the first chance of running away from him, so I made up my mind to leave home and to lose myself in a new world."

Jim drew her arm tighter within his own.

"And a pretty fine mess you came near to making of yourself," he said not unkindly. "I guess it's a jolly good thing you've found a strong, big chap like me to take care of you."

She looked up at his towering form, and rejoiced at the strength in his big strong face.

"You will protect me always from my father and that man?" she asked simply.

"Protect you?" Jim laughed derisively. "Just let them try their hanky-panky on me or you and see what happens. I've told you; you're my wife, and I

mean to hold you agen all the world. Here we are, back at the digs; in half an hour we'll be saddled and bridled and away to the bush."

As he stepped into the narrow hall of the apartment house, Mrs. Dolly, the landlady, emerged from the front sitting-room.

"There's a letter and a telegram for you, Mr. Strong. I've put 'em on the table."

Jim frowned.

"A telegram for me," he said, passing in. "I wonder who it's from."

Isobel stood wonderingly by, watching the window and fearing every second lest Lord Markworth and the hateful Fleck should reappear.

Jim read the wire through, and a strange look passed over his rugged face.

Then, without a word, he opened the letter. For several minutes he struggled with it valiantly.

"Here, Belle, I don't quite figger out what the feller says. Read it for me, will you?"

Isobel took the letter and read it through with ever-quickenings fears.

"It's from the owner of the homestead—our shack," she said, with a catch in her voice. "He tells you that there's a hitch about the title deeds, and that purchase can't be completed for a couple of months yet, and, though we're married, we shan't be able to get into our home. Oh, Jim!"

Jim did not answer. He stood by the window, staring out into the dusty street, where the hot wind rustled the plane-trees.

"It don't matter," he said after a pause, producing the crumpled telegram. "I've made up my mind what we're going to do. Something's happened besides what you've just read in that letter. We've got to change our plans. We're going back to Henner's Lode."

With a cry like that of a wounded animal in pain,

Isobel leapt to her feet. Her face was white as driven snow, and her coral nails bit deep into the soft skin of her hands.

"Never, never!" she flung out defiantly. "No power on earth will drag me back to Phil Brant's home."

Slowly Jim swung round, and at the expression on his face she shrank back, panting.

"That's enough," he thundered. "I've said we're going back to Brant's. Don't argue. My mind's made up; whether you want to or not, we're going back to Brant's."

Isobel stood very still, her clenched hands resting on Mrs. Dolly's front-room table, and only her narrowing watchful eyes expressive of life.

"But, Jim, surely you can't mean it," she said, speaking very slowly, and turning a very steady glance on him as he crossed the narrow space of room.

"I mean what I say," he muttered thunderously. "You're my wife, and a wife's duty is to live with her husband, to go where he goes. Something's happened to alter my plans—our plans—so we're goin' back to Brant's without more shystering."

The sun-gold tan seemed to quiver in her cheeks and throat at the mere mention of the hateful name. All the same, she would not let him see she was afraid.

"You have asked me to do the hardest thing of my life, beside which to marry you against my better judgment was almost simple and child's play," she answered. "And you have asked me——"

"Told you."

"Well, told me in such a way that were you to use that brute strength of yours a thousand times, I shouldn't give in, because, well, because I'm a girl of spirit, just as much as you're a man of will."

A little of the passionate anger was dying in Jim's face.

"I guess I was a bit hasty like," he said apologetically.

"I oughter have thought as you're my wife, and a lady, too, and I'm only a station rouserer with plain, blunt ways. Forgive me, Belle, and let me explain."

"Explain what?" she asked, allowing him to take her small hand into his, and looking up into his softening eyes with something of the innocence of a child.

"Why, I've got to ask you to do something which goes against the grain. I've heard from Brant—this wire is from him—he wants me back."

"Wants you back?" she repeated. "That's funny. I thought you and he were on such bad terms that neither of you wanted to see the other again."

Jim fidgeted uneasily beneath the questioning of her clear eyes.

"Well, it wasn't quite so bad as that," he said, forcing a laugh. "But the fact is, well, Brant's ill. The telegram says he's mighty bad, and as I was sort o' manager for him up at the station, he feels he can't do without my help, and so he asked me to get back to the station as soon as possible."

"If it's better for you I'll go, only don't try to force me into things against my will," looking into his handsome face pleadingly. "I won't forget that I'm your wife, and that it's my duty to do all I can to please you, but when you're rough, and shout at me, something stirs in my blood, a madness comes over me, and I feel as though a thousand wild horses couldn't drag me the way I don't want to go. But be kind, speak kindly to me, and then, why, of course, we shall get along all right and be as happy as we can wish."

Jim drew her closer, but averted his face to the heat-throbbing street.

"I forgot; it's my fault entirely. Fancy ordering you to do things, a lady like you, and I'm only a rough stockman. I'm sorry, Belle; let's kiss and forget it."

"Oh, we shall get on all right," she said with an assumed light-heartedness she was far from feeling.

"We've both gone into marriage to suit our own purposes, so we mustn't complain if at first we don't find it all we expected. But the main thing, I suppose, is to avoid the corners as much as possible. I'm ready, if you really mean to go back to Henner's Lode."

Her face, her eyes, her lips were smiling, and the man's suspicions were lulled. If only he could have seen into the hot, aching, rebellious heart, could have known the effort it was costing her to stifle every instinct, to surrender that pride which had come down to her through a thousand years of noble ancestry!

"I guess we'll settle up and get along," he said, picking up his whip and lifting the saddles from the pegs in the hall. "We'll arrange for all the things you've bought to be fetched up in this week's coach. Those you've got upstairs I can strap on the bay behind me."

He went out whistling, leaving her with one hand pressed to her beating heart. The sound of his heavy boots on the cobbles in the yard beat like the thumping of a loud-voiced bell in her brain.

"I've been a fool—an unutterable fool—to sell myself into marriage," she muttered. "Better a thousand times to have died on the spinifex flats, or to have starved in Sydney, than to give myself to a man who will try to break me in like an unbroken horse." Then she thought of his simple goodness to her that night in the bush, and picturing to herself the grave concern in his face, a shadowy smile won its way again to her eyes, and she made up her mind to be brave.

Half an hour later she was cantering briskly at Jim's side, with the town but a blur behind them, and rich downs of bluegrass, edged with pine and palm scrub, stretching away to the western horizon.

Jim spoke but little; the swarms of flies kept him busy, despite the circle of corks that dangled from the brim of his hat. A sand veil hid her face, flaming under the beating sun. In time they came to the trees where

cicadas shrilled continually, and she began to think that the shelter of Lou Brant's living-room or the shade of the small kitchen, with its wash-board and camp oven, would be preferable to this blinding, dazzling heat.

In the palm scrub, where wonga vines hung in great festoons, they drew rein, drank sparingly of bottled water, and talked for a few minutes to give the horses a rest.

Jim was smoking stolidly when she turned to him with a puzzled look on her face.

"I wonder what Ursy'll say when she knows?" she said suddenly. "I suppose she'll be mad with me."

The stockman swung round in his saddle.

"Never fear; we'll put all that right when we get there. Phil is boss of his own homestead, for all a lot of squealing women may say. Don't you worry; I'm going in on terms this time, and it's hats off to Mr. Strong and his wife and the whole caboosh of them, I can tell you."

Towards sundown a loping boundary rider on his lonely beat passed them with a handwave, and the pounding of his horse's hoofs sounded in the dry brown earth till long after the salt bush had swallowed him up.

"I shall be glad when night comes," she said, a trifle wearily, as her straining glance swept a range of sun-wreathed hills covered with ti-trees and bunya pines.

Jim laughed, and flicked the flies from her dust veil.

"We'll be at Henner's Lode afore then, lassie. There you can get tea and rest."

She smiled at him gratefully, and for a long while after that his glance never roved from the golden sun tan of her face and sweeping throat.

At the sliprail he dismounted, and, after helping her down, drew the saddles and bridles from the steaming mares.

Outside their sheds the usual throng of roustabouts loafed and laughed, but at sight of her in her new clothes

a hushed silence fell between them, and more than one grimed hand went to its greasy hat-brim.

"Boys this is my wife!" Jim called, swaggering into the group with a pride not lost on Sullivan or Ryan. "Guess you'll all welcome her back, and give us both a start off in the new life."

At the prospect of a "binge" their inertia fell away, and a loud cheer drowned the fluting of dingoes far off in the hills. Moreover, it brought Ursula, blinking and pucker-eyed, to the kitchen door.

"Sure, it's not the mail! That came yesterday," she said, and then stopped dead as Jim held out his hand.

"No; it's me—and my wife, Ursy," he said. "Hi! Come on and shake!"—this to Isobel, who lingered a little timorously by the house-paddock gate.

Ursula stared.

"Your wife, Jim?" she repeated, showing her teeth suddenly, and passing a hot tongue over her lips. "Phil never told me. Glad to meet you, Mrs. Strong." And though she held out her hand, she gave vent to a laugh which struck Isobel as harsh and unfeeling.

Slowly her brown hands rolled the veil on to the soft brim of the hat, and at sight of the hot face beneath Ursula uttered a scream of derision.

"Sure, and if it isn't the hired girl come back! Oh, this is proper funny. Say, Jim, what d'you mean about your wife?"

Isobel's glance fell full on the girl.

"He means what he says. We were married to-day in Walong. Won't you shake hands and be friends?"

In all her life Isobel did nothing that cost her so much as this brave attempt to forget and forgive. Ursula stared, still smiling vacuously, but made no attempt to take the proffered hand.

"Well, I never. You two simply beat the band. I suppose you'd better come inside." And with that she

turned and darted indoors to hide the breaking sob in her parched throat.

Isobel followed Jim into the smoky kitchen.

"Where's Phil?" he asked, unaware of Isobel's near presence.

Ursula turned a maize cake out of a tin and kept her back to Jim.

"Shooting geese in Marker's Gully; at least, that's what he said he was out for when he left at noon. You'd better ride out if you want to see him. I know he wants to talk to you."

"Opine the wish is mutual," replied the young stock-rider, with a grin. "I've rid fur enough to-day without goin' out after him. D'ye know where he means to fix us—my wife an' me, I mean?"

An envious sneer curved Ursula Brant's lips.

"Yes; in the new shack he built for the fresh manager what was coming and hasn't turned up. Phil's going in fer big things, as you'll see when you ride round the new boundary fence."

Jim laughed softly to himself.

"Oh, like that, is it? How's Lou?"

"Lou's all right—much better; in fac' we've all kept pretty well since you and that girl went off. Why didn't you tell us you meant to get spliced?"

"For the simple reason, my dear Ursy, that I never tell anyone business which concerns only myself. I'll walk over to the new shack to see if it'll suit, and you can tell Phil when he comes back he'll find me there."

There was something in his voice which brought Ursula round with a flush on her sharp face.

"You're talking mighty big and loud, Mr. Strong, all at once. What's the game?" she asked.

Jim still stared through the kitchen window beyond the plain to where a shadowy blur of bunya-pine and iron-bark trees marked the foot of the range.

"Not such as I'd talk about to any woman," he

muttered thoughtfully. "And, look here, Ursy, if you've a mind to stay on good terms with my wife an' me, just you scuttle round a bit and make her a cup of tea."

Paying no heed to the girl's grumbling remonstrances, he swung out into the station yard and called Isobel. To his surprise she reappeared from Lou Brant's front door.

"I want to be alone with you for a minute or two," she said, and he did not notice how white she had gone.

Jim nodded and crossed the home paddock to where the slab and bark walls and the slated roof of a brand new shack showed through the orchard trees.

"Not more than I want to get you to myself," he answered gaily. "D'you think I've forgotten that this is our wedding-day? I want you to get into one of those fine frocks you bought down town, and let the boys see you. They'll be looking for a bit of a shine to-night. Ah, this is something like the real thing!"—throwing wide the door and ushering her into an airy living-room quite comfortably furnished in its rough way, with a sleeping apartment on one side and a small kitchen on the other.

"Yes, this will do very nicely," Isobel muttered, scarce conscious of her words, scarce conscious of anything save the loud thumping of her heart and the cold feeling of anger in her cheeks. "Do you mind shutting that door?"

The man obeyed wonderingly. As he turned to her again she was standing with her back to the unlit stove, her hands at her sides and her fingers tightly clenched. In her eyes, those wonderful, fathomless, clear eyes which had so often stirred his soul, was a gleam he had never seen there before—a look of unutterable scorn.

Then her words fell across the silence like a whip-crack.

"I want to know why you brought me back to this place under a misrepresentation—why you lied to me by

saying Mr. Brant's illness was the cause of your returning here? I was willing to come, to sink my own prejudices and dislikes, when you told me you had to return because your sense of duty wouldn't allow you to leave in the lurch a man who was sick. Jim, that was a lie—a downright deliberate lie! Why did you tell it?"

A flush of guilt stole into the stockman's tanned cheeks, and he held his head like a schoolboy caught in a wrongful act.

"He is sick—sick in a way you don't understand," he muttered doggedly. "He's got drought illness from last summer, consumption in both pockets, and if he don't pull himself together mighty slick, his station and the homestead will go up the spout. That's what I meant when I said he was ill——"

He broke off, unable to pursue the unstable line of explanation any farther, for the expression of the girl's face showed more clearly than any words that she knew he was lying.

"Very well, we'll let it go at that," she said, her lips curling. "In future I shall know what to expect from the promises made in the church to-day. The start isn't a good or a hopeful one—don't blame me if we come to disaster. There, you'd better go, someone is calling you."

She dismissed him with a contemptuous wave of her hand, and as Jim lumbered to the door he knew how small he had made himself in her eyes.

On the top step he halted as two men broke their way through the trees—Phil Brant, looking a picture of ruddy healthfulness, and a stranger he had never before seen.

Brant came to a halt in the shade of the scarce-stirring foliage, and, crooking his gun in his arm, wiped his streaming brow.

"Glad to see you, Jim," he hailed, puckering his sun-strained eyes. "We'll come in the new shack for a bit of straight talk. Homestead not too healthy with that

free-tongued Ursy about. Like as not she'd spout everything round Walong."

He lurched towards the door, and Jim turned, eyeing his wife fiercely.

"Get in there!" he muttered, pointing to the bedroom. "Shut the door, and until I call you don't you dare show your face!"

Without a word Isobel turned and disappeared, just as the two men lumbered heavily in. She shut the door, and, unable longer to restrain her unhappiness, threw herself on to the white coverlet, and, hiding her face in her hands, wept as though her heart would break.

Brant was the first to speak.

"Well, Jim, what d'yer think of the show I've got eady for you both?" he asked, signing his friend to follow him and gripping the stockman's hand.

Jim laughed.

"Good enough; so long as the woman is pleased I don't much care. I guess we'll shake down all right till the big deal's through."

Brant laughed good-naturedly.

"Bully for you, lad. Jim, this is my friend, Mr. Probert. Probert, this is Strong, my manager now. He's come back to help me expand a bit, ain't you, Jim? 'Bacca, Jim? And Probert, you'll find a bottle of wine and some glasses in that cupboard over your head. May as well do this business friendly like."

The clink of the tumblers and the bubbling of the liquor came to Isobel even through her unhappy self-commiseration. She heard them raise their glasses and drink good luck to the new enterprise.

Then all three settled down in their chairs, and the reek of strong tobacco was wafted to her through the tiny cracks between the slabs.

Brant broke the silence.

"You'd better tell him," he said, turning to Probert. "Fact is, Jim, our friend here is a big buyer of cattle

and horses ; uses 'em a lot in his business. I've told him we haven't horses to sell him, though his offer's good enough. That's so, isn't it ? "

" Quite true. We've got nothing on the station as isn't in use. What are you looking for, Mr. Probert ? "

The little man screwed up his eyes and sent blue spirals of smoke to the ceiling.

" Well, it's like this "—jangling the loose coins in his pockets—" I don't know as I'm on the look-out so much for hawses as for other stuff. You see, Strong, there's bin a big rush down Harrison Creek way ; someone turned up a vein of good gold and they've been pouring in from Adelaide and Melbourne and Sydney—in fact, from all over the show—in their thousands. But the creek is hunnereds of miles from anywhere, and miners must be fed, same as ornery folk. When they get hungry they want beef, and I'm out to supply 'em, see ? "

Jim laughed and shot Brant a quizzical glance.

" Guess my friend here and me could find you a bit if the price was all right. Like most chaps in the back blocks, I'm not too well blessed, and, now I've taken a woman to wife, a little bit of extra would come in a bit handy."

Brant nodded.

" Just what I thought when I sent you the wire, Jim. Mr. Probert, you should understand there's not a stock-man in the Waranoa country as can round up cattle like my friend Strong. He's good at finding 'em, first-class at mixing up tracks, quick on his brumby, and as for bringing 'em in and getting all the marks off and a brand-new set on, I guess you'll not find a better this side of the border."

Probert looked pleased.

" Then I'll leave that part of the business to you. My terms are these : I'm looking for a hundred head inside a week, and I'll pay spot cash ten pound a head, scrubbers

and starvers included, provided the whole herd is lodged within Marker's Gully by midnight on Saturday."

Brant turned to the young stock-rider.

"Now, Jim, what d'you say? It means a square thousand—five hundred for you, and five hundred for me. Can we round 'em up—a hundred inside a week?"

Jim became thoughtfully silent, his mind taking in the whole range of countryside for many miles around.

"I guess Jasper Deselden down to Merumbie has a fine lot o' stock, good fat steers and cows eatin' their heads off in long bluegrass. We might make sure of a couple o' score of them."

"Good! And what about MacAndrew?"

"Well, now, there we'll go slow. MacAndrew's lot is all behind bullock-proof fences, and black fellers swarm his grazing like flies."

A grunt broke from Probert.

"We don't want to cross no black trackers. They're awkward to throw off once they get on the blood trail. Better let Andy MacAndrew alone. Who farms as far as the west end of Posse Canyon?"

Brant scratched his grey head.

"Peters, I believe. Nobbled the land years back. It don't any more belong to him than it does to me, and I guess he's had more'n a few of my bulls. Jim, we might try Peters; a night dash through Posse Canyon would be a pretty bit of work for you."

Jim rose and stretched his immense frame. His brain and blood thrilled at the very notion.

"I'm getting pretty stale," he yawned. "Yes, I'll do it. But, 'sh! I'd forgotten something"—laying his finger on his lips. "Wait a moment. My wife's inside that room. I oughter make sure she hasn't heard."

Softly Jim turned the door handle and looked in. He made out the disarranged bed, the dip in the quilt where Isobel had lain, and as he passed his hand over

the place to straighten it out, he felt the moisture of her tears upon the pillow.

"Poor Belle! Reckon she'll think the worse of me over this," he reflected moodily, and moved about in the gloom until he discovered that the little door at the far end of the shack was open, and that through this she had let herself out.

"Gone back to Lou's for that tea, I guess," he decided, and returned to his companions.

But Isobel had not gone to the Brant homestead for tea. Her heart ached too desperately to allow physical wants to make themselves felt. This was her wedding-day, and though she had done her best, it was fast ending in disaster. First, the lie about the telegram; next, the untrue and unconvincing explanation; and now—a hundred times worse—this vile plot in which her husband was engaged for the stealing of other men's cattle.

As she pushed on through the deepening dusk, searching for a sliprail in the stock-fence, she hardly knew what her purpose was in going.

But she felt she must get away somewhere remote from those whispering voices whose every word sank like a barb into her tortured heart.

Almost before she realised it, she found herself a good mile from the station, with a dense barrier of scrub and tangled wonga barring her path. So she halted in a little glade, and, slipping to the still warm ground, propped her chin in her hands, and tried to reason what best to do.

In a little while her reflections were broken by a crackling in the undergrowth. She started up and screamed, as the tall, lithe form of a black fellow darted out of the scrub scarce a score of feet away.

That, indeed, was the worst thing she could have done, for in a second the native had reached her, and she found herself struggling helplessly in his grasp.

"Doan kick or bite, white gel. Me hones' black feller,

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come longa way," he said, in a sing-song voice, still holding her close. "Wacher doin' he-ah?"

She tried to wrench herself free, and beat at his face, but he simply smiled at her puny efforts, and held her helpless till the clink of a bridle-chain and the glint of metal buttons showed through the trees.

"Black feller got sometink," the native exclaimed proudly, as a mounted figure rode into the tiny clearing, and dropped deftly from the saddle to the thick grass.

Isobel stared over her shoulder in pleased surprise as she made out the form and uniform of a mounted trooper.

"That's all right, Wally. It's a girl. Let her go; I'll speak to her," said a deep, rich voice, and the next moment the officer had tossed his bridle to the black tracker, and planted himself in Isobel's path.

"Young lady, what are you doing out in the bush at this time of night?" he asked, in not unfriendly tones.

Isobel was fast recovering from her fears.

"I belong to the station, Henner's Lode," she answered, pointing to the faint outlines of the selection outbuildings where already lights were twinkling through the blueness.

The man laughed, and his spurs clicked. She saw the glint of the short-barrelled carbine slung over his shoulder and the powder of fine dust that clung to his clothes.

"So you do, eh?" he said, inclining his head. "Then I reckon you'll just about be useful to me. You know what I am, don't you?"

"Yes. A member of the New South Wales Police Force," the girl admitted.

"Exactly. The place I'm looking for is Brant's station." His manner became suddenly judicial. "I want you to tell me if there's a young fellow there name of Strong. Tall, big chap he is, a stock-rider who's been putting in a few weeks' money-busting down at Walong. We're after him. D'you know if he's there?"

The night stars reeled about Isobel. Jim, her husband, wanted by the police! Whatever for? she wondered. Had it anything to do with Probert's coming? Did they mean to arrest him for projected cattle stealing, or was there something else in his past which she knew nothing about?

Her breath came fast. She was conscious of the trooper's keen glance fixed watchfully upon her. What should she say? Ought she to tell all she knew?

Of course, it was but a momentary and unworthy temptation, this thought to aid the law against one who needed her protection. The idea was preposterous that she should give him away to this police sleuth whose black tracker had brought him all those miles hot on the trail of their quarry.

"Jim is my husband," she told herself with a sudden tightening of her pale lips. "No matter what he's done, it's my duty to shield him, and neither police nor black tracker will get a single word of evidence out of me."

The trooper's voice broke in on her thoughts.

"Come, miss. You're from Brant's station," he repeated mercilessly. "I want you to tell me if the man Jim Strong is there?"

She glanced up half-fearfully into the stern face, set and lowering in the white light of the uprising moon. How should she answer?

Suddenly Isobel threw back her head and laughed so that the trooper caught the quivering of the muscles at her throat.

"That's a bit of a tall order, isn't it—asking a girl off the same station whether a wanted man is there or not? I reckon I want satisfying a bit before I start giving the show away," she said, dropping cleverly into the staccato bush way of speaking.

The trooper tugged viciously at his mare's bridle as the animal showed signs of impatience.

"What d'you mean by 'satisfying,' anyway?" he demanded briskly. "Of course, if it's a matter of a reward, well, I dessay something might be done when we've got the criminal. The Government isn't unmindful, you know, of those who help it."

The girl tossed her dark head defiantly in the white light of the moon.

"That's hardly good enough," she answered, with a hard laugh meant to hide the ache of fear in her heart. "I've got my life to lead up at the station after this business is all over. I might be able to do things either way, don't you see?"

The policeman made as though to move a step nearer, but she backed, raising one hand warningly.

"Don't do that! And you can tell your black tracker to stand immediately behind you, or I might raise a warning cooee which would put everyone within a couple of miles of me on the alert."

"At which I should promptly make you my prisoner," Sergeant Hurry retorted bitingly. "All right, I'll do as you say. Wally, come in!"

The black fellow grinned, but obeyed willingly enough.

"Because you've no alternative," Isobel jeered, nodding her head towards the black. "Now, officer, how does this deal lie between us? I can help you get the man you want—the man you ought to have," she corrected hastily. "But whether or not I'm willing to run the risk depends entirely on yourself."

Hurry guffawed.

"So you imagine the game rests all with you, Miss Cocksure? Supposin' I leave you out altogether, ride straight up to the homestead, tether up to a sliprail, go straight in, and arrest my man. What then?"

"Why, then all the men on the station would be fools, and you'd be just about the luckiest trooper this side of the range. It won't go, officer. If you're to go

away with a capture, I opine it's only to be done through me. I can help you, or I can trick you."

Hurry turned into a statue beside his horse. This girl was certainly clever—as quick with her brain as she was with her tongue.

"I'm not going back empty-handed, even if the station roustabouts begin to draw on me," he said doggedly, slinging his carbine into view, and shooting a swift glance at the clip of brass-headed cartridges in the magazine.

"No one asked you to," she said briskly. "Promise to get me a Government reward—something good, mind, what will take me away from the drudgery of station life—and I'll help you slip handcuffs on the man whose capture means promotion for you."

Hurry grinned.

"You're pretty slick for a back block girl," he said. "Been here long?"

"No, I haven't, and I jolly well shan't care how little longer I stay. I hate the place."

"Where do you come from?" he asked curiously.

"From England; so now you know. And if you want to ask any more questions, well, you'll only hear lies, so take that from me."

The trooper's answer was to vault lightly in the saddle, and, still holding his carbine in one hand, to set his horse at a walking pace towards the homestead.

Half a mile from it, as a dingo barked, Isobel stopped dead.

"This won't do at all. If that rascal spots you, like as not he'll start letting off with a six-shooter," she whispered half-fearfully. "Now do we come to a deal—I to get you the criminal or give you a fair chance of getting him, and showing in for a share of the reward, or do I give the whole game away with one warning shout?"

The keen eyes beneath the trooper's bushy brows

swept the homestead, where dark forms moved against the lighted windows along the veranda.

"About the reward, you'll hev to square with the Government, but they'll give you something," he muttered, biting at his moustache. "In one way you've got me fair; if you want to trick me you can do it, an' I can't prevent you without putting a bullet into your skin, and that's a thing I've never done to a woman yet."

She laughed softly, and brought her soft hands to her lips.

"You couldn't do it even then, officer. Long before your trigger-hand came round I should have my call at Henner's Lode, and you—well, you and Wally would just have ridden all this way out for nothing. See?"

This time Hurry swore aloud.

"What are you going to do?" he said.

"Get back, leaving you here. I'll tell the man who's wanted by the police that there's a mounted trooper and a black tracker outside, and that if he's wise he'll come out quietly without a lot of gun-firing. How'll that do?"

Hurry looked grim.

"They're your terms—not mine," he responded tartly. "If anything goes wrong, and the firing starts, you look out you don't come in for a bit of it."

A laugh escaped her.

"I'm willing to take my chance," and, waving him farewell, she stole like a shadow back to the house, leaving Trooper Hurry and the black tracker to follow slowly but none the less surely.

All the lights in the sheds had long since been doused, but a bright glare streamed from the kitchen window. Silently she tiptoed towards it and peeped in. Lou Brant and Ursula sat by the stove talking in low, confidential whispers.

"Jim is still with Brant and that wretch Probert,"

she murmured, holding her hands to her breast, and racing across the orchard. "Oh! Who is that?" as a tall form detached itself from one of the trees and a rough, strong hand reached out and closed upon her arm with a grip that made her wince.

"Got you, and a jolly fine dance you've led me!" said an angry voice, and she turned to find herself in the remorseless grip of her husband.

Her white, agonised face was turned upwards in pleading.

"Oh, Jim, don't!" she whispered. "Listen to me. I want to save you!"

"Save me from what? You're mad, girl, stark, staring mad, that's what you are!"

She wrenched her wrist free and laid her hand pleadingly on his sleeve.

"I'm not. I've been away, fighting for your safety. You are in danger, terrible danger; but if you do all I tell you, I may be able to pull you through even yet."

"Danger! I'm in no danger. Besides, I've done nothing!" he said; and as he drew his great height up she caught the angry flash of his blue eyes.

"You are. A trooper and a black fellow have tracked you all the way from Walong, over all those miles of plain and scrub and bush. He's armed with a loaded carbine, and determined to take you at any cost. No; don't draw a weapon!" as the young stockman's hand stole round to the pocket at his hip. "Once the firing begins, all the boys will start in, and blood'll be spilt right and left. Just do as I tell you, and all will come right."

"And what might that be?"

"Go into the bedroom—the room I left by the door at the far end. It's still open. Promise me to stay there till I come."

"But what good will that do? If the trooper wants

me, he'll fetch me out, and I don't give in to any man without a fight."

A smile flitted across her brave, pale face.

"Leave all the fighting to me, dear. A woman's wits are a match for any man's cunning, even a black tracker's. Promise, *do* promise, and go quickly."

Her words of endearment, the anxiety she betrayed to befriend him, stirred a responsive chord in Jim's heart. With a backward glance, as though he hated the course he was taking, and half hoped she would relieve him, he stole towards the house. Half-way to it she was by his side again.

"Where is the cattle-dealer—the man Probert?" she asked.

A sniff of suspicion left him.

"Then you overheard?"

"Everything," she admitted.

"What d'you want to know for?"

"Never mind now. Tell me, or within twenty-four hours you'll be in prison. Where will our married life be then?"

"Heaven knows," he answered bitterly. "But I can't say where Probert is."

She knew his bush code of honour kept him from speaking, and pressed the point no further. Instead, she almost pushed him in the direction of the bedroom, and retraced her steps towards the dimly lighted front room. Then, with a quick upward rush, she mounted to the door, flung it wide, and stood before the two surprised men, white-faced and dishevelled.

The illicit cattle-buyer and thief promoter sprang to his feet, his eyes bulging and his lower jaw dropping.

"What in the name o' thunder is this? Who is she, Brant?"—swinging round on the equally surprised stockman.

Isobel closed the door and dropped her voice to a whisper that Jim should not hear.

"Never mind who I am. Mr. Probert, I wish to speak to you. Come outside at once!"

No one was more surprised than she when he obeyed without a further word of argument.

"Well, what is it? Who are you, and what d'you want with me?" he asked, showing his teeth wolfishly.

Isobel kept herself wonderfully in hand.

"I know all about you, Mr. Probert—all about your cattle-stealing exploits; your getting otherwise honest men to round up and rebrand other squatters' steers. Now I'm going to put the facts before you just as they are. You're armed, and you've got a horse."

"And what of it?" he rasped, fidgeting uneasily beneath her burning gaze.

"You should be inside the walls of the nearest State prison—that's the least you deserve," she went on contemptuously. "But I mean to give you a chance, just as I'm giving the other fellow a chance. Less than three hundred yards away on the front side of the homestead is a mounted trooper and a black tracker."

"Is that so?" Probert gasped, reaching for his hip gun.

"It is. And it's up to you to decide whether you'll walk out to him for a little heart to heart talk, or whether you'll ride as you've never ridden before!"

"I'll ride!" he muttered, and at that he started running, just as a black figure leapt over the boundary rails by the stock-yard, and came like an evil shadow flashing through the home paddock.

Isobel heard a call—the tracker's call to his master—and the jingle of Trooper Hurry's bridle as he forced his mare at a gallop towards the homestead.

But under the moon Probert was running—running with a speed that gave even the black scarce a chance; for by the time Wally was clear of the paddock the cattle-buyer had mounted his horse and was away like the wind in the direction of the plains.

Isobel ran round to the front of the house and gained the veranda. Already Probert, bending low, was a good three-quarters of a mile away, a mere speck, fast vanishing to nothingness. And every now and then a spurt of red flame stabbed through the darkness, and the crack of Hurry's rifle came to her on the night wind.

CHAPTER VIII

ISOBEL'S FIGHT FOR HAPPINESS

THE cheap, blatant-ticking clock with which Brant had supplied the new shack showed the hour of two before the excitement caused by the firing, and by Isobel's account of what had happened, died down, leaving her and her husband free to go to their own temporary home.

As Jim walked at her side across the orchard, she had noticed the thunderous blackness which had settled on his brow. He followed her in, closing the door with a slam and turning the key in the lock. Then, raising the flame of the lamp, with a sudden gesture of ill-concealed anger, he bade her sit down.

This Isobel did, with apparent meekness.

"You wish to speak to me, to say what's in your mind," she said quite calmly. "It won't take long to explain. I know Mr. Brant suspects me of giving his plans away, of trying to get Mr. Probert into a trap. I did nothing of the sort. Instead, I gave Probert a chance he doesn't deserve—a run for freedom. It was either him or you; I chose him."

Jim punched a wedge of tobacco thoughtfully in his rough palm.

"That's mighty kind of you, Belle, but, all the same, I don't see how it happened. In putting this trooper chap on to Probert, besides spoiling a pretty bit of business, you've done in your own and my chances of ever making a hit o' things out in these parts. Don't

you understand? You've given a man away to the police, and they'll never forget it."

Isobel remained perfectly serene, watching the stream of blue smoke ooze from his puckered lips.

"On the contrary, I gave him a chance to escape. The trooper wanted you; I knew he'd never take you without a struggle. Someone might have been killed, and you'd have found yourself in gaol with blood on your hands. If I've saved you from that, I don't care a straw what the people either say or think."

A grim smile began to play about Jim's sombre mouth.

"What I want to know is how you came into the business at all, as between Probert and Brant and me? And why all this talk about my goin' to prison?"

The girl's head lifted swiftly in pride, and her clear, steadfast glance met his fearlessly.

"Everything that passed between you three men this evening I overheard. The horror of it frightened me—I wanted to get away out into the bush where I could be alone and think what best could be done to save you from yourself. I went away from the house; a couple of miles out I came across a trooper and a black tracker, making for Henner's Lode. They asked me what I was doing alone in the bush, and then if a man named Strong—Jim Strong—was there, because the police authorities wanted him."

Jim frowned and drew his pipe from his mouth.

"But why me? I tell you, I hev'n't done nothing. This business with Phil and Probert is the first thing, and when it's through I mean to chuck the game and go straight."

"I knew if once the sergeant showed up and tried to take you, innocent or guilty, you'd show fight," she continued, "so I just bargained with him. I agreed to tell the man he wanted that a policeman was outside waiting to see him."

"The man he wanted?" repeated Jim.

"Yes, I mean Probert. Probert was the man he ought to have taken. If the police don't want a man like that, they don't want anybody. So I told Probert, and he did just what I expected—made a dash for his horse. I guessed what would happen as soon as the tracker saw him in full flight. He and the trooper would follow hot on his heels, which they did, and you, Jim, oh, thank Heaven, you are safe."

Her emotion was not lost upon Strong, but he didn't mean to let her see it.

"Agreed you did a mighty smart bit of work there," he muttered. "All the same, the trooper was making a mistake. I'm not wanted for anything, and the sum-total of your interference comes to this, that unless Bill Probert escapes and throws those police dogs off, we'll find our deal crabbed."

Slow horror began to grip at Isobel's heart.

"But, surely, Jim, you don't intend keeping on with this thing, this cattle-lifting?"

He threw back his head and laughed boisterously.

"Intend? I've given my hand on it. Phil and me is up to our necks in the business. Of course, if Probert gets away—an' we'll jolly soon learn—the affair will come off all right, and instead of sticking on at this station at six pounds a month, I shall pocket a cool five hundred of the brightest and best, and away we'll go to get our little home together. There, how does that appeal to you?"

"Appeal to me?" Isobel's voice vibrated with scorn. "D'you imagine I mean to let my husband turn into a common cattle-stealer, or that I'd live in a home got together with stolen money?"

Jim gestured impatiently.

"Don't be foolish, Belle. It ain't stealing. Half them cows and bulls in Peters's herd has been lifted from someone else's grazing. All we're goin' to do is

to turn 'em inside Brant's fences and let Probert have them to feed hungry miners down at Harrison's Creek. Poor fellers, you wouldn't see them go hungry now, would you?"

Isobel remained unmoved.

"That's not the question at all. If Mr. Probert wants to sell them beef, let him buy it honestly. No, Jim, it won't do; this is a dishonest bit of business, and you're not going into it."

The man yawned, stretched himself, rose from his chair, and towered over her aggressively.

"Not, eh? So you're taking it on yourself to tell me what I may and what I mayn't do. With what right?"

"The right of a wife to watch over her husband!" she flung back hotly. "Listen! I married you because you wanted me to, because you said you were lonely, and because I was friendless and penniless and in need of a home. Now, having done it, I've got to consider my duty to you, to the name I bear, and with God's help I mean to do it."

"Even to ruining a five hundred pound deal?"

"Yes, and a five thousand one if there was dishonesty behind it. I'd rather give the whole plot away to the police first."

"What?" he almost screamed, backing out of his chair, and fixing her with glinting eyes. "You'd sell your husband?"

"No, I'd save him. I've a duty to do by you, Jim, to keep you straight when unscrupulous brutes like Brant and Probert are trying to exploit your simple nature for their own profit."

"I'm coming in fer a share, ain't I?"

"Yes, of the trouble, when it comes. Be brave, Jim; do the right, straight thing," she pleaded brokenly. "Tell these men you'll have none of their ways. Lean on your own strength, and on me, and, believe me, dear, all will come well."

As she came towards him, her head thrown back, her whole manner soulfully entreating, all that was resentful of her in his heart died out. With a low laugh of happiness, he caught her up and held her close to his breast.

"I will, Belle, I will. For your dear sake, I'll do it."

Slowly she raised her lips in silent invitation; he lowered his face, and they sealed the happiness of this strange wedding-day with a kiss whose memory would linger in her heart for ever.

CHAPTER IX

JIM'S WIFE

"Joy, little wife, this is going to be a great day," said Jim the morning after his wedding, as he stood on the steps of his temporary home and looked out on the scene of animation proceeding in the stock-yard.

Isobel came to his side, smiling happily, and peered over his shoulder.

"What's all the bustle and excitement about, Jim?" she asked.

Jim showed his fine teeth with a smile.

"The boys is punting round a bit to get done. Look, now, altho' it's scarcely six, Pat Ryan and Jackie Sullivan are pretty nigh through wi' their bit of graft. In less nor an hour, when the breakfast's through, they'll have the old buggy off and be away. And won't they come back fine loaded, if I'm any judge!"

"Loaded? What for, Jim?"

The man turned and put his great brown hands upon her shoulders.

"For you, and for me, of course. It's a bust-up they're on for, a bit of celebratin' our wedding like. Well, here, you'll have to be mighty busy with your flour pan and oven, I tell you. You'll have to cook as though your life depended on it."

Isobel smiled up into his glowing face.

"I don't mind that at all, so long as you and the boys enjoy yourselves," she answered, and turned to the task of preparing the breakfast. "I feel so much happier than I did last night, with that dreadful shadow hanging

over me, and wondering whatever would become of you."

"Don't you worry your little head about that, darling; I'm through with the stock-lifting game. But I've got to tell Brant, though, and he'll cut up properly rough. I'll tell him in the morning. There'll be heaps o' time between now and next Saturday "

The rest of that day passed pleasantly enough. As Jim had predicted, before the sun had reached its zenith there was a great commotion in the orchard, and Pat and Sullivan and Harry Garton, in fact every hand on the station down to the Malay cook, appeared staggering under a load.

"Shure, and it's ourselves hev come to be after wishing you well, Mrs. Sthrong," said Pat in his broadest brogue. "We'll call a bit of a corroborree this night as ever was, and my friend Misther Sullivan here, the same has brought ye wiv our best compliments a bit o' stuff from the station store to make a blouse."

He dumped his purchases on to the rough kitchen table, and Isobel, with her grey eyes dancing, bent over them with the eagerness of a child.

"Oh! It's too good and kind of you altogether," she exclaimed gratefully. "I'm sure I'm a very lucky girl."

Isobel's deft fingers sorted out the various packages gleefully.

"You're wonderful shoppers, all of you," she said. "I'm sure Jim will be delighted, but he'll thank you, and say the same as I do, that you shouldn't have spent your hard-earned savings on us."

"Nonsense," was Sullivan's rejoinder. "You just get on with the cooking, and we'll push a fair share on to Lou and Ursy, and the whole crowd'll crush in somewheres."

Isobel had never done so much cooking in her life. She baked and boiled and roasted, made cakes and puffs

and tarts. The whole store of the Brant's household utensils were requisitioned, and fires indoors and out kept at stokehold pressure to cope with the task.

But by the time sunset gave way rapidly to twilight the last finishing touches were done, and soon after a happy, laughing throng of shining-faced fellows, carefully shaven, and with hair that hadn't been on the best of terms with brushes for many weeks well oiled and plastered down, lumbered noisily in and took their places wherever sitting or standing room could be found. While the cups circulated and the canvas bags of tobacco went round, the night was made hilarious with song and merriment.

Suddenly Jim looked down into his wife's tired face.

He felt her wilt and droop a little in his arms, and for a second she closed her eyes as though she would faint.

Jim drew her a little way apart.

"Guess you're feeling more'n a little tired, eh?" he whispered.

Isobel nodded.

"Yes, I'm very tired, Jim. I shan't be sorry when it's all over."

There was very good reason why Isobel should be feeling more than a little fatigued. For more than nineteen hours now she had been on her feet, toiling through the broiling heat of the day and doing her utmost to make the affair go with a swing.

The man ran his glance over the twisting, twirling maze of pirouetting figures.

"There's a long way to go yet. At midnight they'll reckon to settle down to cards. That'll be the chance for you and the rest of the women folk to clear. Everybody'll understand."

She smiled her thanks gratefully and hid her fatigue for another hour. But at the end of that time the respite came, and quite happy, but thoroughly done up, she retired to her room.

Not so Jim, however. With all the directness of a master of ceremonies, he marshalled his men into the shack, set the lights full on, and produced the cards. This, in fact, was the men's real chance to enjoy themselves in their own rough way, and until the first grey flush of the dawn began to pearl the eastern sky they drank and smoked and played for ever-increasing stakes.

And then, one by one, with less than an hour to go to sunrise, they sought their sheds, and Jim, taking no heed of his clothes, crept softly into the bedroom, and threw himself down, dressed and dishevelled as he was.

The ringing of the station bell awoke them, and Jim tumbled out into the yard where a troughful of water removed a few of the traces of the wild night's revelry. Isobel dressed, feeling desperately tired still. She passed into the living-room, and stood stock-still, frozen with amaze. And amaze gave way to something like disgust as she looked upon the dreadful scene of débris.

The floor still ran wet with overturned liquor; broken cups, mugs, and glasses lay everywhere. Ash and stale tobacco knocked from reeking pipes made a carpet upon the boards. In all her life she had never looked upon such a scene of wreckage.

Slowly she went to the door and threw it wide. She stood there, her cheeks flushing scarlet with shame and disgust, and the instincts she had brought with her from her father's home rising in a flood within her breast.

"The place is disgustingly filthy," she muttered, leaning out for a breath of fresh, sweet air. "Surely Jim doesn't expect me to clean it up."

She looked again on the dreadful scene; the smell of the beer sickened her. At her feet was a litter of broken glass.

"I can't do it, I won't!" she said desperately. "I wanted them to enjoy themselves, but I never meant them to leave the place like this. My home—home, forsooth! I won't do it, I won't!" she cried desperately,

and moved towards the steps just as a tall form darkened the doorway.

"What's that, Belle? You won't do what?" asked Jim, who had come in with a rare edge for his breakfast. She turned on him a trifle scornfully.

"Why, clear up this mess," she said doggedly. "The place wasn't like it when I went to bed last night. Tired though I was after the dance, I came in and tidied up, and set the room ready for the cards. But I didn't reckon the lot of you were going to turn it into a pigsty."

Jim frowned.

"But you must allow that the boys wanted to enjoy themselves."

Had she not been feeling so utterly worn out Isobel would never have answered as she did.

"I don't call this enjoying yourselves," she said, touching the débris with her foot. "One understands that a supper and a jolly evening for backwoodsmen means a bit of untidiness, but this—this is positively disgusting."

Jim looked towards the stove. As yet the fire was unlighted, and the appetising aroma of fried ham and eggs was very far off the realisation.

"Never mind. Just you buckle in, lass, and get through with the job. I want my breakfast, and there's no time for argument."

Something in his tones, a note of determination which carried the girl's mind back to his attitude on their wedding-day, when she had defied him in Mrs. Dolly's front sitting-room down at Walong, stiffened her dwindling resolution.

"I'll not do it," she returned doggedly. "This isn't a woman's job to go on hands and knees and to clean out a place filthier than any stable. The room reeks; it's unfit for any decent person to be in. If you want it cleaned, you'd better fetch those who made the mess to clear it up."

Jim looked at her in a way she failed to understand.

"Guess you'll be wise to do as I tell you," he said slowly. "Time's getting on, I've a sight to do, and I want my breakfast."

She remained motionless, staring out across the paddock into the blue distance.

"D'you hear? I want my breakfast," he repeated, a trifle irritably this time.

She swung round, her lips set firm.

"You shall have your breakfast," was her quick reply, and going down on her knees she raked out the ashes, laid paper and wood, and in a very few moments had a brisk fire crackling in the stove. Silence fell between them, as she moved quickly about, clearing the only dry corner of the table and laying across it a snow-white cloth. Next, she brewed a pot of tea, set the rashers before him with a loaf and some butter, and again took her station by the door.

The man finished his meal in silence.

"Won't you have some tea?" he asked, rising.

"No, thank you; I don't want any."

"You're sure?"

"Quite sure. I always say what I mean."

A frown, black as thunder, settled on Jim's brow. It was the old ground, the ground he and she had traversed before—her will against his. He could see that by the steely, sombre fires in her eyes, the tight set of her lips, and the proud throw of her head.

Slowly he rose and lumbered towards her. His great hand came to rest on her shoulder.

"Now, look you here, Belle," he said slowly, turning her body round so that she was obliged to face him. "We've got to hev an understanding a bit sooner than I thought. You're my wife, you know that?"

"Oh, yes, I know it," she flung back mirthlessly.

"Good. And a wife's duty is to obey her husband, you know that?"

Her head came up, and her eyes shone with fires of revolt.

"Not in all things. A wife's duty is to look after her husband, to try to please him."

"Oh, you admit that. Then why not try and please me now? I've told you what I want done, what I mean to have done. This place must be put shipshape and tidy. Now, are you going to do it?"

She drew her arm away, and moved out of reach of him.

"No, I'm not."

"Not if I command you?"

"You can command what you like"—pursing her lips—"it won't make a bit of difference."

The bronze in Jim's cheeks changed to the ruddiness of scarcely controllable anger, and where his red, rough shirt was open at the throat she saw the quivering of the muscles there.

"D'you mean to defy me?" he asked, stepping towards her suddenly and seizing her wrist with a grip which made her wince with pain.

She shrank back, and tried to tear herself free.

"Yes, over this I do, and over everything else, if you try to bully me. I know I'm your wife, Jim Strong, but that doesn't give you the right to order me about, to try and make me do things which no woman with any decency or self-respect would care to do."

The man's grip tightened and his teeth came together with a click.

"When I make up my mind to a thing, Isobel, it's goin' to be done," he said, forcing her against the table. "Now, listen! I'd have let you off this cleaning up business, have done it myself, if you hadn't set me at defiance. But this tomfool business about what you will and what you won't do has gone far enough. I'm boss of this team, boss o' the shack; boss o' you, and what I says goes. Now d'you understand?"

Her breath came and went in short gasps, and she looked up into his flaming angry face with a glance of unutterable scorn and determination.

"I should despise myself all my life if I bent my will to yours," she panted. "You heard what I said, that I refuse to clean the room out. Now what are you going to do?"

"What am I going to do?" he laughed, glancing back at the clock. "I'll give you just sixty minutes in which to obey. If by the end of that time you haven't finished——"

He left the sentence unspoken as a voice hailed him across the stock-yard.

Isobel watched him go, swinging away with swift, healthful strides, a towering figure of a man for whose giant strength admiration in her heart was changed to fear. Slowly she sank down on to the form, leaned her soft arms upon the table, and, bowing her head upon them, wept silently.

CHAPTER X

ISOBEL BEGINS TO UNDERSTAND

As the morning advanced, the sun began to beat down from a sky of glassy brightness with a heat that was almost overpowering.

A slight, slim figure, attired in white ducks, with a sun helmet screening his kindly, grave eyes from the glare, flicked his jaded horse into a canter, which he kept up steadily until he came to the Henner's Lode boundary rail.

In Brant's house no one was visible, both Ursula and Lou being away somewhere on the run. So he crossed the home paddock and made towards the shack in the orchard above which a haze of blue smoke trailed lazily. On the thick grass his footsteps made no sound; nor was the bowed figure of the unhappy girl raised from her posture of grief when he stood full in the doorway, a look of unutterable surprise and sadness on his good-looking face.

"Dear, dear, this won't do at all!" he said in grave, sympathetic tones, laying his hand on the girl's shoulder. "Now, what's all the trouble about?"

Isobel started, and looked up with surprise.

"Mr. Lisle!" she said in a faint whisper, turning from him to hide her tears.

The minister closed the door, and removed his hat.

"I never expected to see you again so soon, Mrs. Strong," he said, following her with a wondering glance. "I understood you and your husband were taking up a homestead at Waranoa."

Isobel dried her eyes, and began to clear away the breakfast things.

"So we were, but the place fell through at the last moment, so my husband came back here."

"Where you were at first, before your marriage, if I remember rightly," he answered. "Now, Mrs. Strong, I hope you're not fretting to go back to the Old Country already."

She was conscious that his glance was taking in the dreadful appearance of the room, and a blush of shame mounted into her cheeks.

"I would rather be anywhere than here," she said in a desperate whisper, clenching her small hands, and glancing at him despairingly. "I hate the place, loathe the life, hate everything. I want to get away. Yes, I'd even go back to England if I had the chance."

With his wider knowledge he read something of what was passing in the back of her mind.

"Come now, that isn't the way for a wife of less than a week to speak," he said earnestly. "Sit down, and just tell me all about the trouble. Perhaps I can help sort the tangle out. You don't know how good I can be in setting troubles right."

"Thank you, you cannot help me," came the answer. "I am not used to the life, that is all. Jim doesn't understand me—or, rather, I don't understand him—and I'm afraid we shall be very, very unhappy."

The minister smiled encouragingly.

"I don't see why you should, Mrs. Strong. Often newly-married couples don't make a hit of it at first; but in a little while, when they begin to understand each other and to learn to give and take, they quickly settle down. Marriage only calls for mutual help, mutual affection, mutual respect."

A surge of passion brought her to his side. With a gesture of disdain she pointed to the floor.

"Could you respect a man who made you clear up that?" she cried. "That is what he would make me do, and I can't do it."

"I believe I begin to understand," he said softly, and rising quickly he took up the whip and replaced it on the nail in the wall. "Did your husband ask you to clear up this wreckage?"

Isobel looked defiant.

"He did, and I refused. It isn't a job for a woman."

Lisle laughed.

"Certainly things do look rather dreadful. But, Mrs. Strong, they're not so bad as they might be. You see, the fellows, a good many of them, are rough—rough and untutored, different from the men in England with nigh two thousand years of civilisation behind them. Bless my soul, I've often seen worse than this." And before she could surmise his intention, he was on his knees, gathering up the fragments of the broken crockery and glass.

"I wouldn't have minded so much if he hadn't ordered me," she explained, her resolution wavering, for she hated to see this man of God doing something that she would not condescend to do.

Lisle looked up from a pile of rubbish and smiled into her tearful face.

"Oh, it's nothing, believe me. Perhaps like most of us men, he is thoughtless at times. He wanted to see the place tidy, and having married a wife he expected her to put it right for him. After all, there is the other side of the question, isn't there?"

A sense of shame ran through Isobel. If this man of culture could go down on his knees, surely she could do the same.

In a moment she was down beside him with dustpan and brush, gathering up the stale tobacco and the dirty ash.

"There, it begins to look better already. By the time Jim returns we shall have it snug and shipshape, just what a man wants to see when he comes home to his meals."

There was no condemnation in his voice, but just a coaxing which brought a smile to her lips and a sob breaking in her throat.

"I am afraid I don't understand them. Their rough ways——"

"Their rough ways are nothing. It is their hearts you have to look at—the cleanest, straightest, noblest hearts in all the world. There isn't a hand on this station who wouldn't go through fire and water for you or for any of the other women if the need arose. Life—life would be nothing to them where the safety or the honour of a woman was concerned. That is how they look upon you deep down in their hearts, and if you want to see them at their best, their real worth, as they really are, wait until you see a woman in danger."

Isobel found her eyes becoming suspiciously moist.

"I shouldn't have spoken as I did," she muttered feelingly. "But when anyone commands me to do something against my will, the very devil rises up within me."

The minister shook his grey head.

"That is where you fall short of understanding. It is the men's nature to carry everything before them. In their fight with the rough earth, the beasts of the field, the forces arrayed against them, they *have* to win. Don't blame them if at times they allow this masterfulness to creep into the home life. They mean nothing by it, and the wise woman is she who sets to work to please with a will, and, when the work is done, contrives how best to soften down the rough places."

"But my freedom, my independence, my pride! What will he think and say when he discovers the room has been cleaned?"

"That you have acted wisely. In a new country like this, one has to learn to become broad-minded. You have lost nothing by doing a job which your husband

wouldn't have minded doing but for the claims on his time elsewhere."

"Do you really think so?"

"I'm certain of it. Ah, there is Mrs. Brant! I must have a crack with her. Now, when Jim returns, see how much happier you'll feel."

He brushed the dust and dirt as best he could from his white suit, and ran down the steps across the paddock.

Isobel watched him go thoughtfully.

"I wonder if he's right and I am wrong?" she reflected. "Perhaps, after all, as Jim's wife, it's my duty to obey him. I'll just make everything as nice and comfortable as possible, and when he does return he'll find a really good meal awaiting him."

With this resolution strong upon her, she laid the cloth, and set to the task of preparing the dinner. When all was done she came again into the living-room. Here a fresh thought struck her. A pink flush crept into her cheeks as she crossed the floor.

"Now I shall know who is right, the minister or I," she whispered. "Here comes Jim. We shall see just what he'll do and say."

An instant later Jim's heavy step sounded on the threshold, where he stood blinking in the sunlight, stunned into amaze by the sight that met his wondering gaze.

"Now that's what I call something like!" Jim cried, advancing into the middle of the room, and surveying every square yard with an air of profound satisfaction. "The sort of place a man likes to come home to when he's feeling peckish, and a bit touchy with tiredness. Come here, Belle, and let me kiss you, and say what a good girl you are."

"I don't know that I want to be kissed," she answered soberly. "I never like anyone to kiss me when they're angry with me, and perhaps you'll be angry

when you know that I'm not quite so good as you imagine."

Jim flung his wideawake into the nearest chair, and, reaching out, drew her within the shelter of his great arms.

"You did what I arst you, like a sensible lass," he whispered, holding her very close. "Now, jest you put your lips up and let me kiss 'em, and we'll forget all about the row."

She winced a little in his arms.

"Jim, I didn't clean the room up because you told me to, but because someone else set me an example."

Slowly the man released her.

"Someone set you an example! So fer as I'm aware, there ain't no stained-glass window saints stalking about this bush country."

She laughed, seeing the amused look which had crept into his steady eyes.

"There's a very real, live, flesh-and-blood one. Like the good sort he is, he guessed what the trouble was, and said that you were in the right and I was in the wrong."

Jim laughed.

"Lumme, I want to meet this chap. Better hev him staying in the shack for good. Then I shall always have a pull over you. Who is it?"

"Why, Mr. Lisle, of course. He's come down from Walong to hold a week-end mission at the station."

Jim's under-lip drooped.

"Thet's a pity. After larst night the boys is in no mood to be pointed to the skies. Better ha' waited for a week. Still, that's his funeral, not mine. I'd like to see him—a very decent little chap, Parson Lisle."

"He spoke very nicely of you—in fact of all the men," she rejoined, her last fears and doubts dropping away. "That's partly why I took a hand with him. We cleared up the shack together."

Jim collapsed on to the form and roared with laughter.

"I'm not making fun of you, Belle, but I'd ha' given worlds to ha' seen you and the sky-pilot a-cleaning up o' that mess. I reckon it was a bit too bad of me to bend it across you like that, but I got fair riled when I saw you standing rebellious by the door, and I told myself what sort of a future would life hold for you and me if you was goin' to ride the high horse all your days."

He had changed his bantering tone to a vein of seriousness not lost upon Isobel, who was looking him very straight between the eyes.

"I'm not going to excuse myself, because I know in my heart I was partly right, partly wrong. I want you, Jim, to see my side—that though I came out to Australia you ought to realise that a girl can't jump all in a moment out of one mode of living into another. Now sit down and enjoy your dinner."

Jim laughed, and broke the loaf of bread in halves.

"I'll do that, if you come and sit' beside me. There, now"—squeezing her hand—"you're still not looking quite happy. Is there anything else worrying you?"

She forced a sad little smile, and tried to eat.

"Only that I wish the Waranoa shack hadn't fallen through," she said, a shade of regret tinging her words. "I fear there'll never be much happiness for you or me here."

"Why not, pray?"

"Well, for one thing, Mr. Brant'll never quite like you for not going in over the cattle-lifting; for another, Ursula hates me, and I distrust her; and for a third, I can't get over the shock of fear which the trooper gave me. I can't imagine why he came to arrest you."

A puzzled frown settled on the stockman's brow.

"That's where he gets me a bit beat, Belle. I ain't done nothing so far as I know, but once you get into the hands of the Government police, they stick on to you whether they've got a case agen you or not."

"Then why not go away? We can't stay on here, living in this place. Brant only made it over to you because he thought you were coming in with him on Probert's cattle deal. And I'll never be really happy where Ursy is, never! Jim, I'd rather go away with you and live under a fly-tent in the salt scrub than stay on here."

"You really mean that?" he asked seriously.

Her beautiful face was very grave.

"I do, honestly."

"Then I'll do it!" he cried, slapping his knee. "I'll ride away this very afternoon and scour the country on the east side of the range. I might pick up a little home-stead straight off, or hear of something going shortly. D'you think you can manage for a day or two?"

A sudden thought struck her.

"But what about Mr. Brant. He ought to be told about those cattle. He'll be expecting you to help lift them for Probert."

"Probert's got all he can do to keep out of the hands of the police. As soon as Hurry finds who it is he's shadowing, he'll be a deal sight keener on roping him in than he was after getting me. As for Brant, I've just heard he's staying up at Simmonds' show till Sunday morning, and I'll be back before then."

This cleared the air somewhat, and for the next hour Isobel was busy helping Jim prepare for the journey. A little after noon he rode away on a fine roan mare, and from the sunlit doorway Isobel watched him until his tall, upright figure became a misty blur against the quivering heat.

She turned to go indoors, when Mrs. Brant's voice sounded from the orchard.

"Belle, you'd best pack up there and come in with us," the woman cried. "I've heard from Jim he's off for several days. Come along now, it won't do for you to mope there alone so soon after your wedding."

Isobel thanked her and promised to come, and that afternoon found her once more installed in the Brant's household. Ursula was none too friendly, hardly ever exchanging a word, but whatever forces were stirring in her revengeful nature, she was careful to hide them and to give no hint of the store of trouble which she was slowly but surely preparing for the "hired girl" who had won from her wide circle of admirers the best-looking man on the station.

Sunday at length drew round, and Isobel could have shouted with joy when she caught sight of a mounted figure outlined against the turquoise of the noonday sky, but to her chagrin he turned aside and rode towards a second form, thoughtfully leaning against one of the boundary sliprails. This was Philip Brant, who had returned just in time to be present at the service, and the minister's words had left him with quiet food for reflection in his heart.

Jim drew in his mare, slipped the saddle and bridle free, and turned her into the home paddock. Then he walked straight up to Brant, and leant towards him over the sliprail.

"I've something to say to you, Phil, which you won't much like," he said, with a suspicious catch in his manly voice.

The elder man drew his pipe from his pocket and began to load it thoughtfully.

"Well, Jim, an' what's the trouble?"

"Trouble for you, I guess," said Jim, marshalling all his resolution. "I've come to tell you to your face I can't come in with you on Probert's deal."

For a while Brant smoked stolidly.

"Rather sudden, isn't it?" he asked.

"Not so very, Phil. I've done a lot o' thinking, hard thinking, since Probert came that night. I reckon I'd be doing the better thing both for you and me—and for someone else—by standing out."

" You mean your wife ? "

" Yes."

" She's been talking to you ? "

" She has that, opened my eyes, old chap, and showed me where I stood—on the edge of a pit."

" Jest like the women. They're all the same. Want the good things of life, but won't run no risk to get 'em. Well, I'm not surprised."

" You mean you thought I'd let you down ? "

" Not altogether, but like you, Jim, I've had time to think. Perhaps it ain't such a good game after all."

Jim brushed the white dust from his riding breeches.

" She pointed out what I'd forgotten, that if ever I had childer, it 'ud come mighty hard on them to know their father was once a cattle-thief. You see, Mr. Brant, I'm only just on the threshold of life, and, God knows, I want to find happiness with that girl. I'd like to put her mind at rest over this, and I hope I'm not leaving you too badly. It's the first time in me life I've ever gone back on me word."

A laugh broke from the bearded ranchman.

" That's mighty strange, Jim. I was thinking of going back too."

It was now the other's turn to show surprise.

" You, Phil ? " he gasped in amaze.

" Yes, me. That blessed sky-pilot's made me think, same as Belle did you. You didn't hear him, or he'd hev touched you by what he said about the wages o' sin. Boy, they're death sure enough, death for the soul, and though I'm a plain, blunt man, I don't want my soul to die any more'n you do yours. We live right out of the world, we do, here in the back blocks, and we're inclined to imagine the laws o' God ain't made for us same as they are for the people who live among churches. But they are, Jim, and the same'll be expected from us as from them."

Jim smiled happily.

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" You're quite right, boss. I'm not much gone on parsons or sermonising, but two days back I told myself that if a poor little fellow like Lisle, who don't get much more'n enough to live on, and gives half o' that away, can go straight, I can go straight too. Would you like me to tell Probert? "

Brant shook his head, and the sunlight danced among the silver flecks in his hair.

" You can't. An' if you did, he wouldn't understand. Trooper Hurry's got him pretty well on the run. He won't leave him this side o' Walong Gaol. Go on, boy, you'd better be getting in. You've bin away three whole days, and there's someone as wants to see you mighty badly, waving at you from the balcony."

CHAPTER XI

JIM IN DANGER

JIM said very little until after lunch, when he put forward the suggestion that Isobel and he should accompany Mr. Lisle on part of the journey home.

Isobel jumped at the suggestion with alacrity, and until well in the afternoon she rode at the minister's side with Jim on the other, chatting gaily.

At last, by Knockman's Gulch, they left the missionary to continue his journey alone, while she and Jim turned their horses' heads back in the direction of Henner's Lode.

"Well, Jim, and what luck have you had?" she asked, unable longer to restrain her curiosity.

Jim glanced in admiration at the graceful figure she made, sitting her mare with perfect ease as only an accomplished horsewoman knows how.

"Not at all bad, Belle," he returned at length. "I've decided to let the Waranoa place slide. There's just as good a one going on the far side of the range up in Macpherson's Country, a wee bit lonely, perhaps, with the nearest homesteads three miles off, but the place is self-contained and has possibilities. If you like, you can ride over to-morrow or Tuesday and hev a look at it."

A desire to make a good start stirred within her heart. The minister's influence was still strong upon her.

"Does it please you?" she asked.

"In every way. I believe I could make a very paying little proposition of it inside three years, and then, maybe, we might be able to afford a trip back to the Old Country. You'd like that, of course?"

Isobel's eyes danced. Now that she had escaped Lord Markworth and was Jim Strong's wife, she had nothing to fear.

"I should indeed. I could take you home, and introduce you to my father, and all the nice people I know. Oh, we'd have such a lovely time. But tell me about the house."

For the next half-hour she rode in silence, while Jim dilated upon his discovery.

"That's all right," she said. "I don't need to see it. If it pleases you, it will surely satisfy me. So I mean to settle down for three hard years of solid work, and to help you make the place a success."

They took tea at Brant's that evening, but were glad to get back to the shack and have the place to themselves, where, until long after sundown, they sat under the trees in the orchard and talked of the new life which was opening for them.

The next day the lumbering mail coach drew up outside Henner's Lode, and, much to Ursula's secret chagrin, deposited by the boundary fence the boxes and trunks containing Isobel's clothes and household effects. As the place Jim intended taking was already plainly furnished and he had agreed to take it over, lock, stock, and barrel, they had little more to do than to move in with such belongings as the drag had brought up from Walong.

By noon Jim set off, accompanied by one of the station hands, to Macpherson's Country, where he meant to see everything shipshape for his wife's incoming at the end of the week.

For the first time since their marriage a sense of loneliness began to steal over Isobel. From the door of the shack in the orchard she watched the heavy waggon until the blue mists that always wreathed the base of the far-distant ridge enfolded it and hid it from view.

She turned away with a sigh, meaning to forget her

solitude in hard work, when a heavy step sounded behind her, and she turned with a start of guilty fear. Then she laughed, laughed at her fears, for it was Sullivan who stood, hat in hand, in the doorway.

"Sorry, Mrs. Strong, but I thought I'd jump in and warn you," he said, lowering his rough voice to a whisper.

A flood of colour swept out of Isobel's fair face.

"You are very kind. What's wrong now?"

The Irishman twirled his hat and moved his head sideways.

"It's that spalpeen of a trooper; he's making for the homestead; I crossed his tracks as I was monkey dodging. He'll be here pretty soon. You know, I heered something from the boys of what he was afther when he came before, and, begorra, I'd not like to be afther seeing Jim in trouble."

"Well, what can be done? Jim hasn't committed any wrong?" she asked.

Sullivan jerked his hand in the direction of the house.

"Guess you'd better be getting along inside with Lou, and tell her not to give away who you are, or that Jim's hanging round. We may be able to fool him a bit that way."

Isobel moved towards the door.

"Where's Ursy?" she asked.

"Gone to the ravine to shoot scrub pigeon."

"Right. And thank you very much. I'll remember what you've said."

Her heart beat fast as she crossed the orchard and entered Lou Brant's kitchen. Phil's wife stood in the doorway, her eyes fixed thoughtfully on the dark line of bush where the wonga vines clustered plentifully about the endless line of barbed wire. A heat haze, almost white in its intensity, dropped like a curtain from the flaming sky to the foot of the hills.

A quarter of a mile off a man on horseback had

drawn rein and was watching the homestead carefully through a pair of raised binoculars.

"A policeman. What's he want?" Lou asked, breaking off in her reverie.

Isobel's hand went to her throat.

"Jim," she said laconically. "Jack has just warned me."

A smile played about the woman's lips.

"You're frightened, Belle."

Isobel coloured.

"I am. What's that man mean by hunting my husband down? He's done no wrong. See, he's coming on at a gallop."

By this time they could see the blue of his uniform and the gleam of his silver-washed buttons, and plainly hear the jangle of his bridle chain. In his left hand he carried a riding-cane, but a carbine peeped maliciously above his swinging right shoulder.

A few moments' canter brought him to the homestead sliprail, where he drew rein and dismounted. Then he walked briskly but alertly across the home paddock.

"Afternoon, Mrs. Brant," he said, saluting respectfully. "Afternoon, miss"—this to Isobel, who shrank a little at his approach. "Pretty hot riding to-day."

Lou smiled.

"It must be. Come inside, sergeant. I'm just about to make a pot of tea."

The trooper stamped noisily in, sending the white dust in clouds from his clothes, and his spurs clicked metallicly.

"Ah! We've met before, haven't we?" he said, seating himself and eyeing Isobel with a smile which revealed his strong, even teeth. "You're the girl who put me on a dead trail."

Isobel, too, sat down, folding her trembling hands under cover of the table.

"Did I?" she retorted innocently. "You said you

were after a bad man, and I certainly gave you a run at one."

Hurry laughed outright.

"So you did, as bad a one as is to be found this side of the Queensland border. But he wasn't the one I was really after, though I'd have given a few months' pay to snaffle him."

Lou came round, holding the steaming kettle poised above the brown earthenware pot.

"So you lost him, sergeant?"

Hurry drew his hand across his wet forehead.

"I did that. We hung on to him like leeches—me and Wally—for two whole days and nights, twisting and turning about in those ravines and gullies, but in the end the beggar slipped us. There's mates of mine still watching, but I guess we'll never get him this side of the summer."

Lou sighed.

"That's a pity. If he's a really bad man he ought to be put in gaol. But surely you didn't expect to find him back here?"

The trooper grinned.

"I wouldn't say that exactly. No. The real reason I come was to take Strong."

"What! Jim Strong?"

"None other. He's here, ain't he?"

Lou laughed, and set a cup of delicious tea into the other's hand.

"No, that he's not. Jim's been gone some little time. I'm afraid you've missed him."

Hurry coughed behind his hand.

"That's a pity. We want him pretty badly."

"What for?" Lou Brant asked, cutting a thick slice of bread, and buttering it lavishly for the new-comer.

"Attempted murder."

"Murder?"

The dreadful word broke in a gasp from Isobel, and

the cup and saucer by her elbow went with a crash to the floor.

"Yes," repeated Hurry, eyeing her curiously. "He shot at a man down in Walong; got drinking, I suppose, and went gun mad. Anyway, he loosed off at this fellow, and his master, Lord Markworth, has given information against him which resulted in our issuing a warrant for his arrest."

Isobel went suddenly white, and rose from her chair to hide her confusion.

"I'm sure there must be a mistake somewhere. Mr. Strong isn't that sort of man at all, is he, Mrs. Brant?"

"Rather not," Lou agreed good-naturedly.

Hurry looked up from a saucer of steaming tea which he had to his lips.

"It don't matter either way. He shot at the poor chap, and wounded him, so I guess when we rope him in he'll have to stand his trial and serve his sentence down at Walong. Where d'you say he's gone?"

Lou heaped another slice of bread-and-butter on to the sergeant's plate.

"Sure, I couldn't say," she retorted innocently. "You see, he's broke from my husband, and gone away. We don't expect to see him at work on this station again. But, of course, if by any chance he should roll up at any time, I'll tell him what you say."

Hurry laughed.

"For Heaven's sake don't do that if you want us to get him. Once he gets wind we're after him, he'll be away to the hills, and then all the police and black trackers in New South Wales won't get him."

Lou looked aggrieved.

"I don't see why we shouldn't do him a good turn if the chance comes our way," she said. "What's your opinion?" turning to the girl.

"Same as yours," answered Isobel promptly. "Why

should we do Government police work, and get nothing for it? Why, the sergeant here promised me if I helped him get the man he wanted he'd do something for me in the way of reward. Perhaps it's coming along."

"Perhaps it isn't," was the good-natured rejoinder. "I told you, miss, I was after Strong, and you threw dust in my eyes by sending me out for Probert."

"I sent you out for the worst man, a man I knew to be a wrong 'un, Mr. Hurry. He was the fellow the Government wanted far more than the poor stock-rider."

"That be blowed! You see, this English peer, Lord Markworth—he's behind the whole business, and I tell you straight he won't be satisfied till he sees Strong in prison with a long sentence. It isn't for me to say, but he'll have a jolly good try at packing a jury, and then I wouldn't be surprised if Strong didn't go down for five years. You see, attempted murder's a bad crime."

Five years! The words rang in the distraught girl's ears like a death-knell. Her husband sent to prison for five long years! True, she had no love for Jim, as a woman should have for the man she has allowed to marry her, but her sense of duty was very strong within her. She thought of him dragging out his weary existence in the dreariness of a prison cell, of the way in which his quick, impetuous nature would chafe under solitary confinement and harsh restrictions.

"I'm very glad he's gone away," she said very coolly. "I don't think either this station or you, sergeant, will ever see him again."

The man drew out his pipe and began to smoke. He was thoroughly jaded with the long ride of the day, and the disappointment at the end of it.

"We shall see, anyway," he muttered doggedly. "Mrs. Brant, did he give you any idea of the direction in which he was going?"

Lou shook her head.

"He didn't at all, Mr. Hurry. All I knew was that he and my husband were through, as far as business was concerned, and that he'd made up his mind not to stay a day longer in the place. He went off only this morning——"

"Riding what? A bay, a roan, or a chestnut?"

"Really I couldn't say," Lou answered innocently enough. "I was busy in the kitchen when he came in to say good-bye. I never actually saw him go."

Hurry relapsed into a thoughtful silence. One thing was quite clear, if he stayed a week he'd not get anything more out of Mrs. Brant or the girl. A little after sundown he mounted his horse and, thanking them for their hospitality, rode away into the bush.

Half an hour later Ursula appeared, and listened curiously to her sister's account. All that night she scarcely slept. Some new idea, some plan to be revenged on Jim and Isobel was forming in her brain. The next morning, as soon as the breakfast things were cleared, she went into the paddock and secured her horse, then, explaining that she intended scouring the gully for the pigeons she had shot on the previous day, she disappeared.

But two miles out from the homestead she changed her course, and made a wide detour for the railhead. Here were a few corrugated roofed houses, a store, a telegraphic office, and the sheds and buildings belonging to the railway.

A young man lounged behind the counter smoking a cigarette as she entered. A flush of pleasure mounted into his good-looking face at sight of the girl.

"Hallo, Ursy, something like a treat to see you!" he cried, gripping her hand and drawing her over the counter towards him. "Haven't seen anything decent-looking in the girl line for months. Be a sport, and give us a kiss."

"I will, if you'll promise to do something for me," she said, drawing back.

"Well, what can I do for you?"

"Send a telegram," was the swift rejoinder. "Here it is."

She drew a form from the home-made box, and, wetting the tip of her pencil, wrote rapidly:

"Police Headquarters, Walong, New South Wales.
—The man Strong will return to Henner's Lode during the next three days. Set watch for him."

That was all. With a cruel little laugh she handed it across the counter, and a minute later the needle instrument was flashing the treacherous message—a message full of dreadful peril for Jim, and unending sorrow for his girl-wife—down to the police at Walong waiting for news of the wanted man's capture.

Peter Flaxman, having sent off the message, leant across the counter in his shirt-sleeves, and winked knowingly at the girl.

"What's your little game, eh?" he asked, trying to catch her wrist. "Out for police reward?"

Ursula tossed her head.

"No, I'm not. I'm out to get a bit of my own back, if you know what that means. Say," glancing half-fearfully towards the door, "you don't suppose anyone else saw me come in?"

The young man glanced up at the clock over his head, and deftly rolled a cigarette.

"No. It's a quiet time of day. I wouldn't mind banking on it we've got the show to ourselves, you and me," and at that he slid stealthily round the counter, and, before she was aware of his intention, his arm was encircling her waist.

"Look here, Peter, I told you I wanted you to do something for me," she said, lowering her voice to a whisper.

"Well, get on with your request. What can I do?"

"Put up a nice story for me when the right time comes," replied the girl. "Now, I want you to think a bit. D'you remember the day when we had a hired girl come to Henner's Lode? She was waiting on the station, and——"

"And one of your stockmen drove up in a buggy and took her luggage for her. I'm not likely to forget that girl. She carried herself like a proper stuck-up town piece of goods."

"You've got her pretty well ticked off," she laughed ill-naturedly. "D'you think you could describe her?"

The clerk ran his stubby forefinger through a tousled mop of flaming hair.

"Oh, pretty well. She was tall, with a fine complexion. Her hair was dark, and her eyes were grey. Of course, I could describe her to anyone."

"D'you think you could remember it was her who came in here to-day and sent off that telegram if I let you kiss me again?"

Her voice was soft and winningly low.

"I've always been very gone on you, Ursy Brant," he said, with his heart thumping in his throat, and leaning forward he caught her in his arms and smothered her face with ardent caresses.

Ursula drew herself free and tidied her disarranged hair.

"Very well, Peter, don't you forget when people begin to ask, as sooner or later they're pretty sure to do, who it was sent off the message to Walong police headquarters. Just forget that I was ever around, and recall the hired girl."

The youth adroitly rolled another cigarette and went with her as far as the door, where he peeped out.

"I shan't forget. Quick, now's your chance if you want to nip off without being spotted. Pull your sun veil down; the station's quiet and there's no one in the

store over the way. Good-bye, Ursy, and let it be soon when you come again."

With a light pressure of his hand, she turned and jumped into the saddle.

How her cheeks burned, and the hot fires surged in her heart! Jim had turned her down just because he had fallen in love with a pretty-faced doll from England.

"The scheming minx," she hissed between her tightly clenched teeth. "I'll let her see whether she can trample me in the dust for nothing." She struck savagely at the mare's flanks, and was glad for the coolness which the speed of her going made upon her burning face and brow.

For a couple of hours she rode hard, and had covered a good many more miles than the straight run between Henner's Lode and the station warranted, when she drew up suddenly at sight of a stranger, who moved deliberately out of the bushes and planted himself in her path.

She saw at once he was well dressed, far better dressed, in fact, than any man she had ever before looked upon. His neat riding suit was of the best material, and evidently cut by a fashionable tailor down Sydney or Melbourne way. The short crop he carried was mounted with silver, and between his thin, tightly compressed lips was stuck a cigar whose delicate fragrance was wafted to her on the hot air.

As she drew the prancing mare to a standstill, rather than go out of her path to avoid him, he raised his hat and bowed apologetically.

"I have to ask a favour," he said, glancing up into her sun- and wind-tanned face. "My purpose is to find Henner's Lode. Like most persons ignorant of bush travelling I have only succeeded in losing my way. I wonder, now, if you——"

"If I could set you on your path," laughed the girl, flicking at Dido's ears with the handle of her crop.

"Well, I should think so, seeing that I live at Henner's Lode."

The man thanked her with the friendliest of smiles.

"Then you must be Miss Brant. How very fortunate I am! I quite expected to pass the night in the salt scrub. Instead, you shall escort me. Of course, I must ask your forgiveness—I haven't introduced myself. I am Lord Markworth."

The girl straightened in her saddle, and her right hand insensibly tucked a straying wisp of hair under her veil.

"Lord Markworth!" she repeated, as though dazed.

"Oh, I never expected——"

"I wanted to make the acquaintance of your hospitable home," he said, deftly mounting and falling in at her side. "You see, I've been staying some time in Walong, and I heard quite a lot about you. Philip Brant is the owner of the station, unless I've been badly misinformed."

"You're right; Phil's the boss," she replied, momentarily forgetting she was addressing a real live peer, for his statement had stirred strange suspicions in her mind.

"But why should you be anxious to get to know us?"

"Because, my dear young lady," Markworth replied, "I wanted to become friends with your father—oh, your sister's husband, is he? Cousins of the same name married each other. Dear me, how strange! Well, so it is. I've heard Phil Brant is a most excellent sort, and I wanted very much to become acquainted."

"I suppose you're nothing to do with that hired girl we had?" she sniffed suspiciously.

"Hired girl?" Markworth dispersed the flies from his mare's flanks. "Have you a new hired girl at your home?"

"We had, but she don't belong to us now. You see, she got making eyes at one of our hands, and he got gone on her and took her down to Walong, where they were married."

Markworth shifted in his saddle, and shot her a questioning glance.

"You mean Jim Strong?"

"Yes. It was Jim. Being a bit of a simpleton, he thought she'd make him a good wife. Is it her you've come to see?"

The man stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"As a matter of fact, I did rather want to see her. Is she still with you?"

A smile parted Ursula's red lips.

"She is—and she isn't. What's happened is this: Directly after the marriage she and Jim came back to us, but he's gone away now, leaving her behind."

"Oh!" His dark eyes gleamed strangely, and she was quick to catch the flash in them. "Could you tell me where he's gone?"

"Why do you want to know?" she burst out challengingly.

Her spirit seemed to amuse Markworth, for he burst into a hearty peal of merriment.

"Miss Brant, shall I be frank with you? My interest is not so much with the man Strong as with the poor unfortunate girl who has been deluded into becoming his wife."

"With Isobel?" she echoed, amazed.

"Precisely. She acted very foolishly in marrying herself to this man, dead against her own and her people's interests. I thought, if only I could find the man, there might be some possibility of getting him to see the folly of what he had done, and of getting him to give the girl up—annul the marriage, or something of that kind."

"But they were married right enough. The wedding was all in order."

The man shook his head.

"It wasn't. She was married under age, without her father's consent, and under a false name. In England such a marriage is unlawful."

"Look here, if you want to get anything out of me, you've got to be straight with me," she said recklessly. "Do you really want to talk to Strong about Isobel for his good, or to give him up to the police?"

"Well, to be perfectly honest with you, I admit I wouldn't much mind seeing that fellow in the hands of the police."

"I'm glad I understand you, Lord Markworth," she laughed. "You want to see Jim Strong taken; so do I. Don't look shocked or surprised; it's the truth! I want to see him in prison. Why? Well, because I'd do anything to see him separated from that girl!"

His lordship smiled triumphantly, and held out his hand.

"Then shake on it, Miss Brant!" he said enthusiastically. "You and I are destined to become the best and closest of friends. But friendship has its price; I demand a share of mine now. Tell me straight out—where is Strong?"

She leant sideways out of her saddle.

"I don't know," she whispered. "But if you'll trust me, I'll promise to find out."

CHAPTER XII

HER HUSBAND'S ACCUSER

URSULA motioned her companion to stop as the roof and shed tops of the homestead showed white against a curtain of dark unbroken bush to the south.

"I've been thinking, Lord Markworth, that if you and me are to make the best of our opportunities," she observed, "it would be as well not to be quite so friendly as a start off."

"You mean—your people at home might suspect us?"

She inclined her head.

"That's it. Both Phil and Lou are a couple of straight birds. You won't catch them giving Strong away if they know it."

"Young lady, your wisdom is that of a goddess," the man said gallantly. "Just make your suggestions, and I'll fall in with them."

"Right!" Ursula became suddenly businesslike. "Just put on a fresh cigar, and amuse yourself punting round the bush for the next half-hour. Leave me to go in alone. We're strangers, you and me," placing her small finger alongside her nose. "We've never met before, and the last persons we shall speak about are Jim Strong or Isobel Grey. But, sooner or later, I'm sure to worm it out of Phil or Lou, or perhaps find out from Belle herself. Then you can get the police to throw a bee-line on him."

With a wave of her hand she bent low in the saddle and was off like the wind. Her sister was in the kitchen busy with the evening meal when Ursula entered. The elder woman looked up.

"Hullo! What about those pigeons?" she asked.

A hot wave of colour mounted from Ursula's neck to the roots of her hair.

"Had rotten luck!" she exclaimed. "Couldn't pick up a single one. Where's Isobel?"

Lou swung round and looked the younger girl steadily up and down.

"I'm sure I couldn't say. Where she goes is no concern of mine," she answered shortly.

Ursula made no answer. Lou knew something, but just what she wouldn't say.

"Like as not she's gone to try and find her husband," she decided. "By eight the moon'll be up. Perhaps I shall find him, too." And with this comforting reflection she made a hurried supper.

Meanwhile, Isobel, thoroughly alarmed for her husband's safety, had decided to leave no stone unturned to join him. Mrs. Brant had told her as best she could the direction in which the shack in Macpherson's Country lay; and after advising her to attempt to reach it without making her purpose known to any of the hands on the station, and giving her the tip to tie pads on the mare's hoofs as soon as she was well away from Henner's Lode, she had returned to her duties in the home, as obstinately determined as Phil was to keep the knowledge of the young stockman's whereabouts to herself.

When night came, however, and the stars began to peep out one by one, Isobel's sense of direction failed her with alarming suddenness. This was something which even Lou, far-sighted though she was, had not reckoned on.

The bush by night looks very different from what it does in the daytime—a fact Isobel realised with overwhelming force when, after another hour's steady pushing on, she found herself back once more almost in the same spot.

"I've made the mistake which all untrained night

travellers make—that of going in a circle,” she told herself wretchedly. “Poor Jim, he won’t get much assistance from my warning at this rate.”

Suddenly she stopped dead, her heart beating time to the pulsing of her throat, as she caught a crackling of the brigalows ahead.

The sounds were too regular and undisguised to be made by a wild animal. She raised her head and sent out a reverberating “Cooee—cooee! Cooee!” The answer came back, and an instant later the head and shoulders of a man parted the clinging vines. With a glad cry Isobel ran forward.

“Jim,” she murmured, and almost before she realised what she was doing she pillowed her head on his broad shoulder.

“My little wife. What brings you to the gully at this time of night? I thought you were safe in the homestead,” Jim said, holding her very close, for through his rough clothes he could feel the rapid beating of her heart.

“I came to look for you—to warn you,” she replied, glancing relievedly into his handsome face. “There is danger for you.”

Laughingly Jim released her.

“Danger? Of what?” he asked incredulously.

“The police. A trooper came to Brant’s yesterday; the same trooper who rode out from Walong the night Probert came. He told Lou he has a warrant for your arrest made out on a charge of attempting to murder Lord Markworth’s secretary.”

“Oh, you mean Fleck,” the stockman laughed, throwing back his head as though the notion amused him. “I clipped his ear, that’s all. They can’t do very much to me for it.”

“They can, and will, because his lordship is behind the prosecution. Markworth is working might and main to rake up a big charge against you; he wants to see you in prison——”

"But why?"

"To separate you from me. Once you are out of the way he thinks to get me back to England to my father."

"And don't you want to go?"

She looked up pleadingly into his grave eyes.

"No! I would rather be where you are, now you are in danger."

At that he hugged her tight, and though she did not return his caresses he kissed her again and again.

"Don't worry about me, little woman. Markworth can't do anything. I'm well known all through the countryside, and all the squatters round would stand for me."

She shook her head despairingly.

"No, no, they wouldn't. From what the trooper said, Lord Markworth would be able to pack a jury, perhaps to influence the judge. They must never take you. We must go away, you and I."

"Well, we're going, aren't we? I was on my way to Brant's station for you. The shack is all ready, just the homiest little place in all the world. But it's a long way, a rare long way right across the range, and you'd never be able to stick a night of riding."

"Yes, I would. Anything to get away. You mustn't go back to Henner's Lode. Every hour Ursula watches me, and if she knew where you were she'd give you away to the police. No one knows but Mr. and Mrs. Brant, and they've promised not to tell."

"This is awkward, Belle. I don't quite know what to do. You see, our new home is miles and miles away, and we'd scarce reach it by sunrise if we rode the whole night through, while Brant's station—why, that's it peeping above the trees."

A gasp broke from the girl.

"I thought I was twenty miles from the homestead," she said, and then she ran to him again, and clung to him like a frightened child as a loud explosion shattered the

night—a deafening report followed an instant later by an agonising cry of human pain.

Jim dragged her clinging arms free.

“Belle,” he muttered, starting to run in the direction of the sound, “unless I’m much mistaken, some poor beggar’s gone to his last rest.”

“You mean—someone has been shot?” Isobel panted.

“I’m afraid so,” came the jerked-out answer, for now both the reverberating echoes and the shrill cry of pain had dropped to silence.

Where the track ended, a mass of tangled ferns and lawyer-vines rose up to bar their progress. Jim’s unerring knowledge of woodcraft could not lead him astray.

“The call came from jest about here,” he muttered, peering about him over the fringe of the tall bushes.

“Ah, here’s something!”

As suddenly as he had come upon the quivering form lying half on his side with knees updrawn, he rose and waved Isobel back.

“This is no place for you, dear,” he whispered. “Something dreadful has happened, an accident, I’ve no doubt, but, all the same, not the sort of thing you want to look upon. Find your way to the house—it lies across there,” pointing through a gap in the softly swaying trees. “Fetch Brant and Ryan and Sullivan. Tell them to bring a hurdle.”

Isobel had not the slightest intention of obeying, not just then, at any rate. She lifted up her skirts and stepped over the ferns.

“It’s Trooper Hurry,” she said in a scared whisper, staring in horror at the white, drawn face, down one side of which a slim crimson thread was trickling slowly. “Someone shot him while he was hanging about the place watching for you. Oh, Jim! This is terrible for you. Can’t you guess what they’ll say when they find out?”

His face was almost savage as he swung round on her.

"Well, and what will they say?" he demanded hoarsely.

"That you killed him. Hurry was out after you, waiting to take you. If you are seen, they'll say he stalked you, and that when he tried to arrest you you shot him. You must go—go at once."

She drew towards him, seizing his hands in hers and looking up in passionate pleading into his anxious face.

"We can prove I did nothing of the sort," was his slow answer.

"Prove? We can do nothing," she retorted bitterly. "Only I know you are innocent. What would my word mean against your enemies? Ursula is against you; Lord Markworth is against you. The conclusion is obvious."

She went down on hands and knees and raised the inert form in her arms. Hurry's fair head fell back, but she noticed in the light of the moon the sudden quivering of the muscles of his throat.

"Go! For heaven's sake, go!" she cried. "You can do no good by staying. You have a gun, perhaps during the journey you have shot with it. They are sure to say you killed him. Oh, my dear, for my sake, for love of me—you say you love me—go! Get away from this awful danger. I am afraid, horribly afraid, of what might happen to you."

Jim's eyes flashed, and she saw how doggedly he set his lips.

"I won't! You support him. I'm going to the house to rouse Brant and fetch something to revive him. In a minute I'll be back."

He turned and dashed away, leaving the girl alone with her burden. She had read about dead men oftentimes, had even pictured to herself what one would look like, but had never experienced the horror which was come upon her now. Only a little while before that fine, big form had throbbed with life and energy;

in a moment of time the flight of a rifle bullet—accidental or otherwise, she knew not which—had snapped the frail thread of life and left the poor limp thing hovering on the brink of eternity. Her thoughts ran on, away from the dead man, away from herself, always to the same point—to Jim. The minutes lengthened and the moon shadows began to lengthen in the glade. Then her heart began to beat faster, for someone was moving among the undergrowth.

"It was about here that I saw him. He appeared to be watching the house," she heard a voice which she recognised as Ursula's say.

"Then he'll be caught, sure enough," came the ready response. "I myself came across the policeman less than half an hour ago, and he told me he was on the look-out."

Faint inertia began to creep over Isobel. If she feared and distrusted Ursula Brant, she feared the second speaker ten times more, for in those soft, silky tones she recognised the voice of Lord Markworth. She stared down at the white brow pillowed against her breast, and held her breath. Then the thunderbolt fell.

Ursula parted the ferns and stood accusingly before her.

"What are you doing here?" she began; but the next instant her voice rose to a scream as her scared glance fell on the trooper's upturned face, and a loud call for help floated through the trees.

Isobel drew her rioting thoughts together.

"There is no need for undue excitement. This poor fellow has met with a dreadful accident," she said coldly. "Will one of you go to the house and hasten assistance? I cannot hold him much longer."

Ursula and Lord Markworth exchanged knowing glances. The girl openly interpreted his meaning.

"You'd best go yourself, and tell what Jim's done."

she said, showing her teeth cruelly. "D'you think we don't know? This is some of his work. We saw him hanging round, didn't we, Lord Markworth?"

Slowly Isobel allowed the limp form to slip to her feet, and every drain of blood streamed out of her cheeks.

"It's a lie—a cruel, wicked lie! He is innocent. I can swear he did not do this thing, because I was with him when the shot was fired."

Markworth was sufficiently insensible of decency to force a smile.

"Of course, if you were with him when the shot was fired, you ought to know. I think, if you're wise, Isobel, you'll forget you ever made such a terrible admission. I'm sure my friend here," nodding towards Ursula, "has no desire to remember it, provided I have not."

A storm of anger began to stir in Isobel's heart.

"This is no place for wrangling—in the presence of a dead man. See, he has passed away," as the last flicker of life left the still form. "Later, you shall both pay for your lying statements. We must carry him to the house."

Markworth leaned suddenly forward and caught her arm in a forceful grip.

"We shall do nothing of the sort," he hissed. "Isobel, you must come with me. I particularly mean to make sure that you have no further communication with the brute who fired the fatal shot. Ursula, I mean Miss Brant, will you remain here while I take Miss Grey back to the house?"

"You'll do nothing of the sort, Lord Markworth," Isobel flamed. "It is monstrous that you and that girl between you should try and fasten the guilt on an innocent man. And don't call me Miss Grey again; it isn't my name at all—never was my name. I'm Mrs. Strong to both of you, and please don't forget it."

Markworth laughed, and dragged her away with a force she felt powerless to resist.

"You're my prisoner, that's what you are," he muttered, with a triumphant grin, dragging her towards the open. "I don't accuse you of complicity in this dreadful business, but you know who did it, and were with Strong when he fired the shot. Of course, you'll be wanted to give evidence against him later on. If you're wise, you won't say too much when you get into the house."

Evidence against her husband! The thought appalled her, yet nerved her to recklessness, for, twisting with the litheness of a young tiger, she drove both her clenched hands full into Markworth's leering face. So sharp and unexpected was the blow that he released her and covered his smarting eyes.

Isobel felt the shackles dropping away; at a bound she was amongst the dense scrub, thrusting, crashing, pushing her way through it, heedless of briars and thorns and the pain of her scratched and bleeding arms. For several minutes she kept blindly on, until Lord Markworth's cries had died away to silence. Then she stopped, wondering what to do for the best.

If only Jim were here, he would advise her, still the loud beating of her heart, and in his quiet, grave manner soften her agonising fears.

When the tumult of emotion was past, she decided to make her way back to Henner' Lode, and there throw herself upon Phil Brant's protection. And, in a little while, Jim would come back, Jim so purposeful and strong. She could remember, even through this terrifying time of doubt and despair, how she had always rejoiced in his strength, except for that one moment when he had bent her to his will after the wedding celebrations. Together they would be able to plan some course of action.

Then she stopped suddenly, helpless inertia coming

upon her once more, for less than three yards away a second dark form lay outstretched upon the turf.

For a moment she stared wild-eyed and undecided, till something hauntingly familiar about the pallid indistinctness of the face nerved her to swift action. She went down beside him and moved his head so that the face was upturned to the sky.

"Jim, Jim!" she cried. "What has happened?"

No answer came from the stilled lips. Tenderly her soft hand moved over his head. He had been knocked unconscious by a heavy blow behind the ear.

Afar off, faint sounds of commotion came from the house. She pictured to herself alarmed figures running to and fro, Brant and his wife, Sullivan and Ryan, and, dominating all, the sinister scheming minds of Markworth and Ursula.

"I must get him away, out of the reach of those two," she decided; and, exerting all her strength, she lifted him up and staggered with him towards the spot where she had tethered the mare.

It needed all her strength to raise Jim's bulk upon the horse's back; but at length she managed it, and holding the senseless man before her, turned the grey's head in the direction of the open country. Hour after hour she pressed on, neither knowing nor caring whither she went, so long as long miles of safety lay between them and that place of haunting memories.

With the coming of the dawn she drew rein at a water-hole, watered the panting grey, and bathed Jim's temples. Next she poured a draught of the cool liquid down his throat, and in a little while had the satisfaction of seeing him open his eyes.

He stared round in blank, stupefied amaze.

"Say, Belle, what's this mean?" he asked, holding his hand to his throbbing brow.

Tenderly she knelt beside him and bathed his aching brow with a handkerchief dipped in water.

"You were lying wounded in the scrub. I found you some time after you left me to go to Brant's for assistance."

A gleam of slowly returning comprehension began to dawn in the stockman's eyes.

"I remember now. I was on my way to the house when someone sprang out on me, and felled me with a club. I tried to struggle with him, but my strength gave out. How did you get me here?"

"Brought you on the mare's back. It would have been fatal to return to Henner's Lode. Lord Markworth was there with that girl."

"What girl?"

"Ursula. I heard them talking confidentially together while I was waiting by the poor trooper. Evidently they had been on the look-out for you."

Jim sat up, stretched himself, and walked towards the water-hole, in which he laved his aching head and arms.

Something of his old briskness of manner began to show again.

"That was a pretty bad business we stumbled on last night," he said. "I wonder who could have done poor Hurry in?"

She shook her head sadly.

"Heaven knows. Those two wanted to fasten the guilt on you."

"On me! Whatever for?"

"I couldn't say, unless Ursula wants to be revenged on you for marrying me, and Lord Markworth is anxious to get me back to England."

"But why should he want to get you back to England?" he asked.

She turned away to where the first rays of the uprising sun were flinging blood-red arms far into the sky.

"He's got the foolish notion that he loves me, and that if only he can take me back to my father, between them

they'll be able to break my will and force me to marry him."

Jim came towards her and took her cold hand in his.

"But that's absurd, little woman," he said tenderly. "You're my wife, and nothing Lord Markworth can do will alter that."

The sadness of despair quivered on her lips.

"There is something he could do, Jim, which would part you and me for ever," she answered slowly.

"What's that?"

"Get you convicted for the death of Trooper Hurry."

"He wasn't dead."

"He died in my arms."

A long silence fell between them. Each read the other's thoughts. Jim broke in upon her agonised doubts.

"I'm not afraid, Belle. I've done no harm. No one can prove anything against me."

She shook her head.

"I'm not so sure. What's to prevent either Markworth or Ursula saying they saw you shoot Sergeant Hurry? You have only my word to protect you, and the word of one can never stand against the false swearing of two."

He laughed.

"Nonsense, dear! We've nothing to fear. By this time they've probably found the chap who bludgeoned me and who shot the trooper. We don't come into the matter at all. Get on the mare's back; I'm going to take you to your new home."

CHAPTER XIII

THE MAN-HUNT

LORD MARKWORTH'S coming to the Brant homestead seemed to have brought disaster in its train.

All that was mortal of Trooper Alfred Hurry of the New South Wales Mounted Police was laid reverently on a hurdle and carried into an outhouse, where a white sheet covered the face and form of the dead, while a solitary horseman spurred away at lightning speed in the direction of the far-distant railhead.

Everybody talked, some more noisily and vehemently than others, calling down the justice of heaven on the desperado. Only Lou Brant and her husband kept wise silence, sure in their hearts that Jim's hand was not the one to strike Hurry down.

His lordship found Ursula at ten the next morning, standing moodily before the living-room window. The weather had changed for the worse in the night, and the great sweep of sky, no longer glaring and throbbing with heat, was dark and thunderous with rain-filled clouds.

Already the rain was drenching down, like a sheet let out of heaven, and deep pools showed in the home paddock and the stock-yard, and the clatter of the water on the galvanised roof sounded like the incessant rattle of myriads of tiny stones falling in an immense steel drum.

Ursula glanced over her shoulder, and stamped her foot.

"Shut that door!" she exclaimed impatiently. This morning, in her present mood, she was certainly no respecter of persons.

Markworth obeyed, though not with very good grace.

"I rather fail to understand your attitude, young woman," he said, with mocking sarcasm, coming close to see, and watching the rising storm over her shoulder. "You appear—well—er—shall we say, somewhat put out?"

"Call it jolly wild, and you'll be nearer the mark," she retorted acidly. "Less than a dozen hours ago I looked like getting that gold and jewelled bangle you promised me. Now I guess the deal's off?"

His lordship's thin, white hands came together, and he placed the tips of his fingers thoughtfully against his tightly compressed lips.

"I don't quite understand," he began; but Ursula grabbed his arm, and pointed towards the cracked earth greedily drinking in great draughts of muddy water.

"Look at it," she muttered, with an expression of ill-nature on her sour face—"washing out every track mark. The man got away—so did Isobel. But for this rain, the police who are coming up in shoals from Walong and the country round would have had him for sure."

"I don't quite follow," Markworth said.

Her impatience became more pronounced.

"Our own chaps have scouted half the night through for miles around this station. Neither of them was anywhere to be found. They must have got away, Jim and that girl, on our grey. I told you Mrs. Brant said she had borrowed it from the stable. So far as we're concerned, if they're only fifty or sixty miles away by this time, once secure in the hills they're as good as five hundred."

His lordship looked glum.

"That's a pity, just when things were beginning to shape well," he reflected. "It might have been a double deal."

"What d'yer mean by a double deal?"

"My dear, don't you see? If Strong is convicted of having caused Hurry's death, Isobel is released for me. I take her back with me to England, where for the sake of her father's good name and her own reputation she promises to become my wife rather than the story of her doings out here shall become known."

"That's all very well, my lord; but I've lost that bangle. Now the chance is gone; this rain has spoiled everything."

The man became suddenly thoughtful.

"I don't see why it should, Miss Brant," he replied slowly. "Admitted, the mounted police may have a job to pick up the tracks of that mare, but I have heard of the skill of some of the fine black trackers."

A little cry of assent broke from her.

"Yes, you're right there. If only we could get one of the Geyder River blacks! They're marvels, sure, at picking up a scent. I wonder if it's worth trying?"

The man sidled round till he was facing her, and his deep-set eyes glowed.

"Of course, anything is worth trying if it promises success," he whispered. "We're at a dead end here. If your sister and her husband know or suspect what has become of the fugitives, they won't say. It's for you and me, Miss Brant, to set to work to paddle our own canoe. Where do these Geyder River fellows hang out?"

"Fifteen or twenty miles away, on the bank of a creek, I know. Are you willing to try them?"

"More than willing. Bless me, I won't stand for a bangle! There's a hundred pounds in good Australian money the day Jim Strong is taken by the police! But, mind you, no going back. You'll have to stick to your story through thick and thin."

The girl shivered, but her determination never wavered.

"It's too late to go back now, anyway," she muttered

fiercely. "What I said last night before the men I've got to keep to, or down I go with the whole lot of them for ever."

"And down, too, you go with the police for false swearing," the man added insidiously. "You've sworn Strong's freedom away already; you can't retract."

"Nor do I want to," she said, her cheeks flaming. "I promised to be revenged on that girl, and no one shall stop me. Thank goodness, the downpour is stopping. In half an hour, by the time we've saddled and bridled, the sun will be shining. I'll tell Phil I'm going to take you round the boundaries to see something of a sheep and cattle ranch. That's good enough for him."

Brant seemed far too worried and obsessed with his own gloomy thoughts to trouble much about Ursula or their strange visitor. Hurry's sad end had cast a shadow over the homestead, and many, many days must pass before the brightness and joy of life came back again.

But, carried away as she was by the all-devouring flames of jealousy and the deep-rooted desire for vengeance, Ursula as yet felt little of this. Here was the time of sowing; afterwards she must reap.

They rode away side by side, she and the English lord who had so cleverly snared her in his net, and by noon had reached the camping place of the Geyder River blacks.

"We must find the chief or headman," Ursula explained. "He's the only one likely to make out what we want." And spurring forward, she made for the centre of the camp, where a motley collection of men with mutilated hands and limb disfigurements, women with their black hair decorated with coloured tufts and knobs, and half-starved dogs, were gathered about a smoky wood fire.

To a venerable-looking man, whose dignity and

repeated requests in broken English for grog, opium, and tobacco proclaimed him as the chief, Ursula briefly explained the purpose of her visit.

"He wants five pounds in gold for the loan of his best tracker, and guarantees he'll find our man if he has to track him across the sand desert," Ursula said, with a meaning smile.

Markworth produced the money gladly, and after staying a few moments to watch the more skilled members of the tribe engaged in fashioning waddies from long strips of ebony beautifully carved, he and his escort rode off, with the tracker loping swiftly at his bridle chain.

"Me name Walter," the black grinned. "White lady says bad man longumms way, but Wallee find him for sure."

It was wonderful what a lot of broken English Wallee had picked up during his many sojournings on the fringes of homesteads and mining camps, but not nearly so wonderful as the skill he displayed in following their tracks unerringly every yard of the way over which they had come.

"And me find bad shooterman, too," he declared, "if good fellow give Wallee sometink belongings bad man."

Ursula nodded and turned to Markworth.

"He means if I can show him something of Strong's, some personal article of his, he can follow him wherever he has gone."

By the time they reached Henner's Lode again all hope of Ursula further disguising her purpose was gone, for already a posse of police was there, and they hailed the Geyder River black with evident satisfaction.

"Just the very chap for us. He probably wouldn't have come if we had fetched him," the chief constable exclaimed gleefully. "Now, Mr. Brant, I'll trouble

you for one of your late stockman's garments and away we go."

Phil shot Ursula a contemptuous glance.

He found Lou in the kitchen, sitting by the fireless grate, an object picture of misery.

"She's given the poor fellow away," he muttered heavily. "What's to be done with her?"

The woman looked up, sad-eyed.

"Who?"

"Why, Ursy, of course. To be revenged on the hired girl, she's got a Geyder River black on his track. He'll be worse than a dozen bloodhounds. They're bound to get him."

A sob broke in Lou's throat; her head dropped to her arms, and she cried bitterly.

Phil squared his immense shoulders and moved towards the door.

"They'll not get a word out of me," he said bitterly. "If they think they can find him, let 'em. Thank God for the rain. Poor Jim!"

A moan escaped the woman.

"He never did it. I know he never did. Our Jim! What will become of him?"

"Goodness only knows!—and a blood relative of mine to blame if he's taken! The stain'll never leave us, Lou; it'll never leave us."

He stumbled out to the sheds and found one of Jim's coats, which he had to hand to the chief of police. It was given to Wallee—a dingy, tattered garment that Jim had worn for sheep work in the lambing season. The tracker buried his head in it, gave a yelp like a kicked dog, and running almost on all fours towards the place where Hurry had been found, made off at a terrific rate towards the bush.

By this time the news had spread far and wide over the countryside. Men of every grade had come in from Walong, Mumbidgee, and the station railhead.

Ursula smiled as she saw Peter Flaxman among them. He waved his hat to her in farewell, and disappeared, hedged in among a bunch of galloping troopers. Markworth, too, was in the throng, riding with a grace and ease he might have shown at a fox hunt in England.

A wild, elated sense of triumph filled Ursula.

The hunt for Isobel's husband had begun. How would it end? she wondered.

Bush life had made a wonderful difference to Isobel. If only her father, a crabbed old man sitting over his books in his library, could have seen her now, he scarce would have recognised her.

Something of this was in Jim's mind as they dropped down into the canyon, beyond whose windings and tortuous maze of minor creeks and gullies Jim's new homestead lay.

"I've been thinking. You're a different woman since you came out here," he said suddenly, keeping his admiring glance steadily upon the golden tan of her throat and cheeks. "What sort of a figure would you have cut after a night in the saddle when you first arrived?"

Isobel laughed with the sheer joy of living.

"I'm sure I should have been dead knocked up," she replied. "Instead of which, I'm fresher than when we started. And, Jim, I'm just longing to see what our new home is like."

"We shall just love this country, both of us," he replied. "I believe, Belle, we're going to find happiness, you and me, out here in the back blocks."

"I'm certain we shall be happier than we were up at Brant's," she replied slowly. "You see, Jim, I never liked the place. It had unpleasant memories from the start, and during these last few days shadows of coming disaster seem to have loomed over it. The

meeting with Lord Markworth and Fleck down at Walong, the coming of the trooper, Ursula's scarce-veiled hostility, and then poor Hurry's sad end. I shall never want to see Henner's Lode again—never, so long as I live."

Jim reined in.

"There's been rain here," he said, indicating the moist earth. "Local showers most likely. Now, little woman, what d'you think of it?"

"Oh, it's just lovely, Jim!—heaps nicer than Brant's, if it is a lot smaller. Do come on; I want to go inside and see all there is to be seen."

They broke into a canter, passed under a natural arch of heat-shielding foliage, and Jim dismounted, throwing his bridle over the nearest post.

"Come along, then!" he cried gaily, striding to the front door, glad that at last something had taken her thoughts off the terrible happenings of the night. "This is the living-room; beyond is the kitchen and wash-up, and there are two bedrooms. Everything comfortable and clean and nice, just as the Rickabys left it."

She followed him into a big square apartment of hewn blocks closely fitted and weather-tight. One long wall was broken by a good window, only lacking a pair of white curtains, which she mentally vowed her hands should soon supply. There were prints upon the wall, crude, flaming lithographs which made a splash of colour against the dead brown of the wood.

A good deal table, spotlessly clean—Jim had scrubbed it thoroughly the previous day—a couple of empty trunks, and three plain chairs completed the furnishing.

Isobel's delight was good to behold. She went upstairs, and found everything in perfect order, the beds made, and the linen sweet and clean as the Rickabys had left it on abandoning the bush for town life.

By the time she came downstairs again, Jim had got a fire going, and already a kettle steamed on the hob.

He had opened all the boxes which had come up from Walong, and in the corner cupboard a goodly array of tins and pots and packages peeped out at her.

Very quietly she stole towards him as he bent at the table cutting thick slices of bread-and-butter, and her soft, rounded arm crept shyly round his neck.

"You've been a dear, Jim," she said, blushing furiously at her own show of emotion. "I'm sure I'm not half good enough for you. There's not a thing you've forgotten; everything a girl could wish for to make her comfortable and happy has been done, and never a word of complaint from the man whose wife told him she did not care."

The loaf slipped from Jim's left hand and rolled across the cloth; the other, still holding the knife to which a lump of butter clung, was upraised, and he turned to her with blank amazement on his handsome, boyish face.

"I don't know I ever expected you to tell me that," he said, in obvious surprise. "D'you really think you'll be happy here, Belle?"

"I'm sure I shall; but first I want to thank you for all you've done—your patience, your kindness, your devotion. Jim, I didn't love you the least little bit when we were married. I don't quite know if I love you now in the right way, but somehow these last two days I've felt different. Don't laugh at me, or I shall cry." Already tears were beginning to gather in her sweet eyes, and for very shame she hid her face against his shoulder. "All this morning, on our way here, I've been telling myself how lonely I should be if anything happened to you."

"Anything happened to me?" he answered, laughing gaily. "Of course nothing's going to happen to me." The knife clattered on to the tablecloth, and his other arm encircled her, too. "And as for being lonely—why, I thought that was my privilege."

His brown hands toyed with the glory of her hair,

and the perfume of her stole about him, carrying his senses away.

"We shall have a chance to forget the old sad days," she whispered, drawing away and raising her glowing eyes to his. Then she leaned towards him in silent invitation. Their lips met in their first love kiss.

In a little while she freed herself from his tight embrace, and tidied her hair by the mirror set over the mantel.

"This won't do at all," she laughed. "The kettle's boiling over, and you're looking just as hungry as a hunter; and, bless me, look what's happened to the loaf and butter!" For the former had rolled across the boards and nestled perilously near the ashes that dropped from the stove, and the butter-plate seemed deciding whether or not to take a swift fall to destruction.

Jim whistled, and rescued both, and in a little while the meal was ready.

Never in all her life had Isobel enjoyed plain fare so much. Insensibly her thoughts went back to her father's table, in the midst of a great panelled hall, and upon it her mind drew a picture of gleaming silver and glinting glass, with a dozen different courses handed round by silent-footed serving men. But her heart told her which she liked best. In God's own country, with all its crudity and primitive ways, the real joy of life had come upon her, finding her at last ready to receive it with wide-open arms.

"Another cup of tea, if you please," Jim sang out, as he passed his cup for the fourth time. "And I guess, if you don't want it, I'll set about that last bit of ham. Well, Belle, what's the matter now?" as the girl pushed back her chair and dropped the cup and saucer with a crash to the boards.

"Oh, Jim, those men! What do they want?" she gasped, as a crowd of swift-moving forms flashed past the window and darkened the open doorway.

The stockman leapt to his feet, turning over a chair and she saw that his bronzed face was tinged with grey.

"Well, what d'you chaps mean, breaking in on a fellow's home like this?" he demanded, as three troopers clattered noisily in.

The foremost, a big, brawny fellow with a short black beard, advanced and laid his hand heavily on Jim's shoulder.

"James Wilfred Strong, I arrest you in the name of the New South Wales Government, on suspicion of having caused the death of Trooper Hurry by shooting him."

"Me shoot Hurry? That I never did!" Jim cried hotly. "This is more'n flesh and blood can stand!"

Inspector Freeman signed to his men, who closed round Jim and slipped a pair of handcuffs on his wrists.

"You'll have plenty of chance to put up your defence in open court," he replied crisply. "If you want two minutes to say good-bye to your wife, you can have it, but my men will remain in the room."

He turned towards the door, when Jim's voice, stern and challenging, brought him up sharp.

"On what evidence am I arrested?" he cried.

Freeman pointed to a slim form which had sidled in behind the troopers.

"On the evidence of that gentleman, Lord Markworth, and the testimony of Miss Ursula Brant, who saw the fatal shot fired."

"It's a lie!" the stockman stormed. "My wife here can prove I was with her at the time the shot was fired."

"Yes, I can," said Isobel, her lips quivering. "We were together in the scrub; we heard the shot, and ran to the place where we found the sergeant."

"You'll have a chance of telling all that to judge and jury," Freeman snapped. "As for you, Mrs. Strong, your evidence will be wanted later, when the trial comes on. For the present, you'll be wise to stay here."

"Where my husband goes, I go," she replied, her grey eyes flashing. "If he's in danger, my place is at his side."

Slowly Jim shook his head.

"No, dear, that won't do. They've got to take me three days' hard riding across the ranges. There's no provision for a woman on a trip like that. You must stay."

A horrible fear seized upon her heart. She looked up and caught sight of Markworth's face, wickedly evil and triumphant, leering at her out of the press.

"I can only stay on one condition, namely, that that man"—pointing to his lordship—"goes with you. I'm frightened of him; he would harm me, try to force me to return to England with him. No, Jim, for pity's sake don't leave me here!"

The prisoner squared his immense shoulders, and the handcuffs rattled on his wrists. Before his guards could stop him he had taken a swift step forward and stood towering over Markworth.

"Mark me, man—or apology of a man," he thundered, "I shall get free from this trap, despite all you and that false-swearing woman may say. I warn you, say a word to my wife, and I'll kill you—kill you, d'ye hear?"

His blue eyes blazed.

Freeman was quick to see the danger, and dragged Jim away.

"It's all right, Strong. You have nothing to fear. Lord Markworth will come with us."

His lordship began to stutter and fume.

"Oh, no, inspector, that won't do at all," he rasped. "My engagements won't permit my leaving this part of the country for some time."

Freeman cut him short with a gesture of dissent.

"My lord, your engagements permitted you to give evidence against this man. They must permit you to

accompany him into custody, where you will repeat all you know before the presiding magistrate. Afterwards, when the prisoner has been committed for trial, you will be free until the case comes on. That is a law which applies to everyone in this country, rich and poor alike."

The man's face fell. This didn't at all suit his plans. He had imagined that, with Strong a prisoner and safe in Walong or Sydney Gaol, he would be free to bend Isobel to his will.

"Is there no other way, inspector? I mean, can't I send a deputy—my solicitor, for instance—to represent me?"

The other shook his head.

"Sorry, sir. In a case like this, first-hand evidence alone will suffice. You must come with us."

A sigh of relief escaped Isobel. At least this danger was removed.

Jim swung round and held out his manacled hands. She moved towards him, when another figure detached itself from the group and nodded familiarly at the girl.

"I guess you've done a pretty smart bit of work," he drawled. "The credit for this business is up to you, an' no mistake. There oughter be something handsome in it, eh?"

Isobel stared wide-eyed.

"Who are you? I've never seen you before. And what do you mean by 'credit of the business'?" she asked.

Peter Flaxman laid a nicotine-stained finger along his hooked nose.

"Jest what I say, young woman," he grinned. "Thet you're the gel what rode over to the rail head and give him away to the police. Mind you, I'm only telling you if there's a reward on his head, it comes to you."

A whiteness began to steal up from her throat to her brow.

"I—wired to the police? It isn't true! You are making a mistake," she gasped.

Flaxman laughed, and drew something from his pocket.

"Oh, no, I'm not, Miss Hoity-toity; you're the bit of goods who put the troopers on him, and the reward goes to you. See here, now, this is a copy of your telegram sent off by me on the 16th: 'To Police Headquarters, Walong, New South Wales—The man Strong will return to Henner's Lode during the next three days. Set watch for him.'"

A roar, like that of a wounded lion, burst from Jim; he struggled madly to tear himself free, but a dozen arms encircled him and dragged him roughly away.

A heart-broken moan issued from the distraught girl; she saw her husband's face, wild and glaring, in the throng—caught one last glimpse of him in the hands of his captors, before she sank inertly to the floor.

CHAPTER XIV

"GREATER LOVE——"

JIM rode away, the centre of a dust cloud whose inner ring was formed of mounted police with loaded carbines slung across their saddle fronts. Willing hands had placed him astride a horse, his legs and wrists firmly secured. At the horse's head was Wallee, the black tracker, grinning with deep satisfaction at the wonderful capture he had made.

A clack and clutter of voices sounded round Jim all through that day, until the party at length rode into Burragong, where a single-line track ran for thirty miles to Caree, after which they must needs take to the bush until Byron was reached. From Byron the train would take him once more to the coast, where gaol awaited him.

At Burragong all the party save Freeman and the black tracker left, Freeman feeling quite secure in his ability to see his prisoner safely behind walls at the destination's end.

Freeman was genially talkative, as most mounted police are to their prisoners. The companionship of a capture is, as a rule, the one break in an otherwise monotonous existence. Nor had the inspector any cause to be inimically silent towards Jim. Nothing was known against him—no one had ever heard of him as a town-gunman or a mail-coach sticker. Even on those rare visits to Walong for the purpose of squandering the season's sheep-shearing profits he had proved himself very well behaved.

So, as they kept on at a steady canter through the

blue night, he turned over all these things in his alert mind. Nor was Jim less busy. Misfortune had struck him down all in a moment of time—Markworth and Ursula's lies, Flaxman's story.

That thought burned most in his heart—the black-guardly attempt to destroy his trust in his wife.

If only he could win free—free to seek revenge on Markworth and Flaxman! Even death would lose some of its bitterness and sting then.

A half-audible exclamation from the tracker awoke him from his pulsing reverie. He glanced up, to see Wallee pointing to the horse on which he sat.

Freeman leapt from the saddle and bent down. Unmistakably the steed was showing signs of lameness. Before them, under the white, garish moon, a stretch of thorn scrub showed.

The trooper, signing to the black, drew away to the shelter of the trees.

"No use going on; we must rest her," he said. "Strong, I'm going to cut you free."

Jim made no answer as the thongs fell away from his cramped limbs. With Wallee's assistance he reached the ground, and Freeman holding his arm, they went together down the slope.

"What's wrong?" Jim asked innocently, when Freeman had finished tethering the mares.

The man scowled.

"Yours gone lame, badly lame. That thorn scrub is rotten for long travelling. Wallee, fetch some water. Strong, you can sit down."

Jim obeyed with the meekness of a child. He drew his manacled wrists over his drawn-up knees, and was glad of the relief which the change of position afforded.

For a good hour trooper and tracker worked at the mare's leg, but when they led her round in a short arc circle she showed little sign of improvement.

Freeman glanced at his watch. It was now close on

ten, and twenty miles of bad travelling lay between him and Caree. So he ordered Wallee to light a fire, and drawing from his capacious pockets a big package of cold meat and bread, he sat down and divided it between his companions.

Jim accepted his share hungrily. He had eaten nothing since breakfast, and began to devour it ravenously. Then his roving thoughts drew to a halt; an idea was slowly forming in his brain. His glance came to rest on the flickering fireglow, and he watched the dancing flames without a sign of emotion on his Sphinx-like face.

The end of an hour found him in the same position, with a lump of fat mutton still clenched tight in his hand. The natural heat warmed it, and it ran in little rivulets of grease along his arm, and where it trickled between the cold steel and the flesh, the handcuffs slid easily and noiselessly.

Freeman was still smoking stolidly. Wallee had rolled himself up in the trooper's spare blanket, and was already sleeping, dog-tired with the long chase of the day.

The man yawned and slipped his pipe from sight. For a long while he watched the nodding figure on the far edge of the fireglow. Jim's head had fallen to his knees; the steel bracelets gleamed in the fitful light of the flames.

Without a sound, Freeman drew his cape about him, worked his way into the hollow under the thorn-bush. He blinked comfortably up at the winking stars until they seemed to die out altogether, and leave him floating blissfully between half waking and unconsciousness.

Once he opened his eyes and stared across the fireglow. The prisoner was still there, sleeping where he sat. But had he measured the distance he would have found Jim a good couple of yards higher up the slope. Freeman dropped away to sleep with one hand grasping his loaded carbine.

In reality, Jim's eyes had never closed. They were fixed ceaselessly on the bands of steel, now covered with fat. Through them his greased flesh began to work ; for nearly three hours he never ceased in the task of wrenching the torn and lacerated limb free.

At last, with a wrench that almost made him cry with pain, the lower thumb-joint worked free ; he held his breath as the circlet of steel dangled from its short length of chain about the other wrist.

A dozen yards separated him from the inspector, who had never moved since he closed his eyes the last time. He lay on his side, breathing regularly, one brown hand clasped about the gun stock. Jim reckoned it took him a good hour of noiseless shuffling to reduce the space between him and the sleeping man to the length of a hand-spring. Then he waited, breathless, taut, bracing himself, till with a leap he launched himself forward full on the form of the sleeping man.

A quick struggle, the thud of a heavy blow, and Freeman rolled over. Jim sprang free, gripping the carbine, which he loosed off a couple of yards wide as Wallee awoke and ran towards him. At the flash of fire and the deafening report, the black spun round, doubled with the nimbleness of a dingo, and disappeared into the scrub.

In a moment Jim had untethered the trooper's mare and was on its back, just as Freeman bounded up, dazed but purposeful.

" Keep back, or I shall fire ! " shouted Jim ; but for all that Freeman was a brave man, and made a wild spring at the mare's bridle.

Jim leant sideways and dealt him a second blow which sent him staggering, after which he dug his heels into the horse's flanks and went away like the wind.

How he rode—madly, blindly, caring nothing for Freeman's warning shouts, which soon died to silence. The bush, wide and free and trackless, lay around, miles

upon miles of salt scrub and spinifex flats, with the winding shelter of the ravines and gullies far to the north.

He must reach them at any cost, reach them, and when the hue-and-cry was died down, find some means of communicating with Isobel and getting her to join him.

The joyous thought spurred him on, the blood ran faster and faster in his veins, and the cool night wind fanned the heat of his burning cheeks. At a wild gallop he pressed on until the dawn broke, by which time he was well amongst the hills.

Here he stayed in hiding for the rest of that day, shooting a couple of scrub pigeon and roasting them over a carefully-screened fire. That night he rode again, with the same wild abandon, caring nothing, so long as the path to freedom lay clear.

Towards noon he drew rein at sight of a black speck of moving matter, standing out against the brown of the sun-baked ground.

He drew the glasses into view and peered through them intently.

"An untethered horse, with something beside it," he muttered, and for several minutes watched, lest the inert mass should move. But time slipped by, the horse grazed in the same circle, but that hunched-up form gave no sign of life.

Jim drew into the shelter of a belt of thorn scrub and made a wide detour.

A ride of a mile brought him within fifty yards of what lay stretched out upon the ground. At a glance he saw it was a man, who lay upon his back, staring glassily into the fire-swept vault of heaven.

"Beat by water!" muttered Jim, and he was soon within hailing distance.

Still no answer came. He gripped the loaded carbine, dismounted, and stood over the traveller. His knees were drawn up almost to his chin, as though he had died

in convulsive agony ; his blistered hands covered his face, a last protection from the blazing sun.

Jim went down on his knees and drew the scorched fingers away. A faint flutter of breath stirred in the crouching body, and Jim started back as though a hand had been laid suddenly upon his shoulder.

" Probert, the cattle thief ! " he gasped. " Probert, dying of thirst ! "

The water-bottle came round, he unscrewed the cap and bent lower to force it between the blackened lips. But something caught his eye, something that drew an exclamation of horror from him—an ebony waddy.

The light of an unpleasant comprehension began to dawn in the fugitive's eyes. His mind was travelling backwards to that night run in the direction of Phil Brant's homestead, to summon assistance to the dying Hurry. Someone had stopped him then ; someone who crept up noiselessly behind, and at a single blow sent him reeling into unconsciousness.

Of course, it was barely possible the culprit could be Probert, although Probert, he knew, had been mercilessly hunted from pillar to post for three whole days and nights by the tireless trooper. Still, the evidence of the ebony waddy might be difficult to explain away.

A moan from the unhappy man drew Jim's attention to him once more. With quick fingers he tore open the collar to the rough red shirt and lowered his ear to the man's faintly-heaving chest.

A sigh, a flutter of life ; that was all.

Jim stood up, and stared hopelessly round.

" Poor wretch ; I've come half a day too late," he muttered pityingly. " If I'd found him this morning——"

The reflection ended abruptly as Probert opened his eyes once more, weakly raised one hand, and pointed to his leg.

Jim understood. With a tenderness that was

natural to him he bent over the injured limb, carefully removing the scrub-torn gaiter. A pitiful sight was revealed. The bone was terribly broken, and dread signs of blood poisoning had already set in.

" How long ? " he asked, turning to the sick man.

Probert understood, for he raised three fingers and a thumb.

" Nearly four days ? " gasped the stockman. " Four days with a bone-splintered leg, and neither food nor drink. And I thought my lot was about as bad as could fall to any man. It jest shows it don't do to grumble too soon. Now, old man, we'll soon have you going."

He was about to lift Probert from the ground when the other pointed to a leather wallet at his side. He made signs which Jim took as instructions to look among the letters and oddments it contained. Apparently, what Probert wanted was a map, for when Jim produced it he weakly nodded his head and allowed the tip of his forefinger to trace a line towards a spot marked with red ink.

At that Jim straightened.

" I see. You want me to take you to a town, where there's a doctor," he muttered. " A town ! " The word hummed in his brain. If he carried Probert to a town his own fate was surely sealed. Every town had its police and telegraph station, and long ago everywhere would have received its warning.

A frown of perplexity settled on the young man's brows.

" If I tek you to a town, sonny, I go in sure enough. The police is well out after me as it is. Once show my face inside ten miles of civilisation and up goes the donkey."

Apprehension showed in Probert's fading eyes, for he moaned in anguish.

That cry of human agony went straight to Jim Strong's heart.

"I'll do it, and tek me chance," he said, ashamed of his momentary weakness. "Now, don't you worry, old man Probert. I'll hev you down to the limb-menders before to-morrow's sunrise."

With an effort he got the injured cattle-thief on to the horse's back.

Then, after a careful study of the map, Jim fetched his own horse, and drawing the other close so that he could support Probert, made off with the best possible speed in a southerly direction.

With only three breaks to revive the injured man and to apply some cooling leaves to the tortured limb, Jim pressed steadily forward, until at length the white roofs and the brown walls of outlying buildings indicated where the township lay.

Early though the hour, plenty of people were astir, and more than one curious glance followed the young stockman as he supported his well-nigh senseless burden along the main street.

At one corner a couple of store clerks stopped and joined in conversation.

"That saddle with the holster looks mightily like an official bit of business, eh?" he asked of his friend.

The other nodded and followed the retreating forms of horses and riders.

"Didn't see the feller's face, but a description's posted. The mounted police are out after a down-country gunman."

"Oh!" was the answer. "Who was hit?"

"Chap of the name of Hurry, Walong Horse. Rounded up a station between here and Macpherson Country and got shot bad. The feller was taken, but got away on the inspector's horse. I was wondering——"

They retraced their steps in the direction of the town.

Meanwhile, Jim was busy formulating his own plans. There was no question of the course he must take. He

would have to get away as soon as Probert was safe in medical hands.

A dairyman pointed him to the doctor's house. He rang the night-bell, for as yet the upper regions of the house showed no signs of life. All the shutters were closed.

In a very few minutes a big man appeared encased in a dressing-gown.

"Are you the doctor, whose name is on that plate?" Jim asked simply.

The other inclined his head.

"I am. What do you want? Unless it's a very urgent case——"

Jim cut him short and tried to prop Probert up in the doorway.

"He's pretty bad. Only by a miracle will you save him. For four days he's been out in the bush without food or water, and this leg's properly done for."

Probert's eyes were glazed still, but every now and then a moan broke from him.

The doctor drew into the hall.

"Bring him in. What's wrong with the leg?" he asked.

Jim carried his burden into the house and set him on a wide couch. In a moment trained hands and eyes were bending to the work of alleviation.

Jim was watching alertly, his boyish face shadowed with anxiety.

"Well, what's the verdict, doctor?" he asked.

The other rose.

"The limb ought to come off from the thigh," he replied gravely. "That would be the only hope of stopping the spread of the poison. He's got dirt into it. Gangrene has already set in, and yet if I try amputation, he'll die." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Whatever is done, there's not the slightest chance of pulling him through."

A groan came from the couch. They spun round. Probert had raised himself on one elbow, a shrivelled, wracked figure of a man, on whose grey features the stamp of death was already set.

"Did you say I'd not pull through?" he whispered huskily.

The doctor knelt by his side and took his hand.

"I did. It is better you should know. The end will be painless, and very soon."

The cattle-thief sank slowly back and stared at the ceiling for several minutes. When he moved, his eyes were turned on Jim—Jim who had risked everything to save not the life of his friend, but of his enemy.

"I must say something before I go," he muttered faintly. "Doctor, don't go," but his words came too late, for already Dr. MacAlister was in the hall in answer to a thunderous summons upon the front door.

Jim turned suddenly faint. He caught a muffled whisper of excited voices, the horrid rattle of steel. He turned to the French window; his shaking hand was upon the latch when a uniformed policeman appeared on the flags.

"Trapped," hissed Jim, swinging round just as the door opened, and a third and a fourth form crowded in behind the medical man.

"Trapped is the only word," the foremost officer repeated grimly. "James Wilfred Strong, I have here a station warrant for your arrest. You are wanted for killing and for escaping from the police. My duty is to arrest you."

Jim wondered if, after all, there might not be some loophole of escape.

"Who said my name is Strong, and on what evidence do you hold a warrant to arrest me?" he asked briskly.

The other stepped close up to him and placed his hand upon his shoulder.

"Here is the warrant; read it yourself. You are

charged with shooting at Trooper Hurry with intent to kill on the night of the 16th inst. Here's your picture ; now do you deny you're the wanted man ? "

At last Jim was cornered.

" You can take me ; I am Jim Strong," he said bitterly. " Doctor, we shan't trouble you much longer."

" Stop ! That man is innocent ! " cried a feeble voice.

Every eye was turned—turned towards the couch on which Probert, the cattle-thief, lay. " Strong did not shoot Hurry. I am the guilty man."

A buzz of excitement ran through the room. They crowded about the stricken form.

Jim was the first to break the oppressive silence.

" You—you shot Hurry ? " he repeated blankly.

Slowly, as though even this slight effort cost him much, Probert inclined his head.

" I guess if you were man enough to bring me in out of that inferno of pain and heat, I'm man enough to do the straight thing before I go down. Doctor, give me something. I believe I'm going——"

A rattle broke the stammering flow of words. Mac-Alister poured something into a glass and forced it between the dying man's lips. Then he raised his hand for silence.

The inspector had drawn to the side of the couch, an open notebook clasped between his fingers.

A little life began to steal back into Probert's cheek.

" Hurry was out after me—for trying to lift Peters' cattle," he said, in a hushed whisper " Somehow he got to know of the plan. He went out hot-foot for me. We struck the bush together—me ahead, but him always on my trail. Put that down. I want them to know. By the third day we were getting back into familiar country again. Hurry hung on like a black tracker. I made for Henner's. Henner's would shelter me. I got in the pine scrub near the house, and lay doggo. But the moon came up ; he found my tracks.

I turned and shot him—God forgive me—shot him in his tracks. It was Wednesday night. I'm going in. Boys, it's come at last."

His head fell back ; the grey shadows began to gather under the closed eyes. He reached out, and Jim took his hand, already fast becoming cold.

The minutes dragged slowly on. The inspector was handing round the written statement for the signatures of witnesses.

Probert spoke again.

" It's the last round up, boys—the big call. Soon, in a little while, the sun'll break up above the dark clouds. Ride—yes, for life. I'm riding, too. The dawn's ahead ; I'm coming to it—nearer—nearer. The light at last——"

His head fell back, a quiver ran through the gaunt frame. Probert's last ride was done.

Jim passed out into the sunlight of the early morning with the men who had been his enemies gripping his hand. He went with them as far as the police-station, where he voluntarily made a statement, describing his escape from Inspector Freeman. This done, he gave himself up on the charge of shooting at Fleck, and asked only one thing—that he might be allowed to write a letter to his wife.

This request was readily enough granted, and later in the day Jim was taken down under escort to Walong Gaol.

Two days passed before Isobel received the note. Jim had no means of sending it to her direct, so he had addressed it to Phil Brant, begging him to allow Sullivan or Ryan to take it across the hills.

For a long time Isobel could do nothing but alternately laugh and cry at her good fortune, until the sight of Sullivan's staring face brought her back to a more sober state of mind.

Then the big fellow rose awkwardly, and fumbled in his pockets.

"Set me down for a big-sized fule, Mrs. Sthrong," he laughed, producing a second envelope. "This also came by the same post, and the boss, he said I was to give it ye."

Wonderingly Isobel turned the envelope over.

"It's from England!" she exclaimed in amazement.

"Whoever can it be from?"

"Bothered if I know," muttered the Irishman, twirling his hat. "P'r'aps it's from someone down under to say you're to go back home, perhaps it's from——"

When she looked up her eyes were shining from behind a mist of tears.

"Whatever do you think has happened, Jack?" she cried, tossing the letter in the air and catching it deftly. "An old maiden aunt in England wants me to go back and look after her for the few years left her, and if I do, she's promised to leave me the whole of her small fortune—about eight hundred a year and a nice house. Of course, if only Jim will come——"

Sullivan grunted, and wagged his immense head sagely;

"Jim? He's in prison, ain't he?"

Isobel laughed.

"Yes. On a most preposterous charge, which will break down as soon as he is faced by his accusers."

"But Sergeant Hurry, miss—didn't they take him for that?"

"They did, only at the eleventh hour the guilty man confessed. It was Probert, the cattle-thief. Oh, don't let's think about him, Jack! I want to talk about my Jim, and to fancy myself going back with him to dear old England."

Again that obstinate look on the station-hand's face.

"Cut it out, Mrs. Sthrong—cut it out, right now. Jim'll never do it. You won't find him striking out for a new-fangled country like England. I know Jim."

A cloud settled upon the girl's fair brow.

"But eight hundred a year! What a pity to let it slide when he has to work so hard."

Sullivan laughed.

"Work hard! What's work in God's own country! Look there, bedad, at the sun and the nodding trees, and the cloudless sky. Arrah, now, if only St. Pathrick had had the good fortune to sthrike this same counthry and to make it Ireland, I guess you wouldn't find a colleen or a broth of a bhoy in Connemara."

With that he mounted his horse, and a moment later was lost to sight among the trees.

A little after Sullivan had gone there came another interruption. A knock sounded on the little front door; she went towards it, flung it wide, only to start back in alarm as the man she hated most in all the world entered.

"Well, what brings you here?" she demanded, swiftly recovering her composure.

Lord Markworth bowed ironically.

"I have come, ridden all this way, from Henner's Lode, to give you a last chance," he said mockingly. "My dear Isobel, don't you think this tomfoolery, this living in a lonely shack and pretending you are finding happiness with a son of the soil, has gone far enough?"

The girl sat down, folding her hands in her lap, but eyeing him very steadily.

"Lord Markworth, you forget whom you are speaking to. I am a married woman. I allow no man to speak of my husband in such terms. Unless you take back your words, I shall be forced to have you thrown bodily from the house. In fact, I may do more"—reaching up swiftly and snatching Jim's riding-crop from the wall—"I may horsewhip you within an inch of your miserable life."

His lordship rose from his chair and edged towards the door, as Isobel strode, purposeful and aroused at last, towards him.

"My dear, you wouldn't have spoken like that when you were in England. Consider your position—the position of a lady; it is not becoming."

"Then take back your insulting reference to my husband!" she stormed. "D'you think I would hesitate to thrash you—yes, thrash you in a manner you don't dream of? Do I owe you pity or compunction—you wretched apology of a man who helped to swear my husband's life away?"

A flood of rich, deep laughter came from the doorway behind her. She swung round to see Sullivan beaming all over his good-natured face.

And, reaching out, he fastened a resistless grip upon Markworth and dragged him into a kneeling position.

"Arrah now, ye durrthy spalpeen, it's the lady's pardon ye'll be afther begging och and for sure! Out with the worruds, or it's meselluf'll be laying into ye till ye cry for mercy."

Isobel laughed.

"Let him get up, Jack; I've a few words to say to him. Now, listen, Lord Markworth, I've some news for you, news which won't please you at all, and will leave you and your fair accomplice in a very awkward position. To begin with, I ought to tell you that the slayer of Sergeant Hurry is now known beyond any possibility of doubt——"

"Jim Strong for certain," Markworth mumbled between his chattering teeth.

"No. Not Jim Strong at all, most noble lord," she retorted mockingly, "but Probert, the cattle-thief."

"It isn't true."

"It is true. This letter contains a copy of the unhappy man's dying statement made to the police two mornings ago."

"How did you get it?"

"My husband was thoughtful enough to send it me. He is still in the hands of the police on the charge of

wounding Mr. Fleck, but that is a small matter, because long before the charge can be brought against him, you and your secretary will have left the country—that is, if the pair of you aren't in gaol."

His lordship fairly gasped.

"Whatever for?"

"For perjury, my lord—a very heavily punished crime. You might remind Ursula Brant of the fact. The pair of you swore what you knew to be a lie, that my husband shot Sergeant Hurry. In the face of Probert's confession your statement doesn't hold water. You'll both be very lucky if you get an uninterrupted passage to England. Now go—go, before I get my good friend here to kick you out."

She pointed to the door. He gave one frightened glance into her resolute face, took a few steps forward, turned as if to say something, but no words came. So he passed out, and the last she saw of him was as he turned in the saddle and shook his fist furiously in the direction of Isobel's home.

The girl turned to Jack with a grateful smile.

"I'm very glad you came back, for more reasons than one," she said gaily. "Let me get you a meal, for you've a long ride, and while you're eating it, I'll write a couple of letters which I want you to get posted for me."

So, while the genial Irishman ate and drank with relish, Isobel wrote her letters, and a little before sundown Jack bore them away with him.

Nearly a week had passed, a week of heart-aching loneliness and of longing to see Jim's face. Then a sound made her glance up. The latch clicked. She could never remember just how she reached the door, for her legs seemed to fall from under her and a violent trembling swept all her strength away at the sound of his deep, strong voice.

And then the miracle happened. She found herself

standing full in the sunlight, her arms outstretched in passionate longing, and her lips framing the words he had yearned so much to hear.

" Oh, Jim, my husband, I am glad you've come."

That was all—the confession of a woman's heart. Through a wondrous silence he held her to him, his lips brushing her cheeks, her hair, her brow.

" I thought you would never come," she whispered brokenly. " The waiting, the suspense, was almost more than I could bear."

Tenderly he raised her, his strong arms about her, and all the love of his great heart trembled upon his lips.

" Then you did care all the time? " he asked.

Her little head dropped on his shoulder and found shelter there.

" I believe, dear, I cared always," she murmured. " Only, I was proud of spirit and blind of heart. But when danger came, danger for you, I began to regard life differently. I saw the brightness that had passed out with your going; I knew that never, never should I be happy without you. But they have let you come back, set you free, and—oh, Jim, I'm so happy I scarcely know what to say! "

He laughed ever so softly for the joy that was stealing over him, and the music of many bells sounded in his ears.

" If this is love, dear heart, your love for me, and mine for you, I guess I am very content. Just take me in, and we'll say ' good-bye ' to sadness for ever."

Her hand lovingly in his, they passed in to their new home.

" I love it—I love it so," she whispered, standing by the window and drinking in the golden sunlight of the day. " The trees, the hills, the plains, and the birds, God's good gifts, all bringing new messages of hope for me. Oh, Jim, why was I blind so long? Do you remember that morning——"

He put his brown hand on her lips and kissed her on the brow.

"We have both forgotten and forgiven," he answered reverently. "There must be no looking back. It's the present, the future. Ah, this is just beautiful to be home again!"

He strode about the place with the sheer delight of one who sees under his hands and eyes all that is dear to him in life. He went from room to room and up the stairs, and everything he saw seemed to add to his kindling delight.

He was brought to a sudden standstill as, peeping in one of the cupboards, he saw something white in the pocket of one of her dresses—the corner of a letter—his last letter to her. Slowly he drew it out and kissed it. Perhaps that was one of the little links which had bound her closer to him.

And then the expression of his glowing face changed as he caught sight of the handwriting, and almost before he realised what he had done he had read it through from the first word to the last.

His whole manner had changed; the buoyancy of youth seemed to have gone from his step as he went thoughtfully down the stairs.

Isobel was standing in the little creeper-covered porch, her radiant face turned to the blue haze of the hills.

Jim's great hand came to rest on her slender shoulder.

"My lass, d'ye know what this means?" he said, in a hoarse whisper from which all the happiness had gone.

Slowly she came round and looked into his dear, grave face.

"Mean, my darling? Nothing, of course," she answered.

Jim shook his head.

"It does. It means you must go away from here, back to that England which you love so well. Think of

all it is to you—eight hundred pounds a year and a fine house. Belle, we must say good-bye."

"Good-bye?" The words trembled on her lips. "There will never be a good-bye between me and my husband while life lasts," she answered softly. "I answered Aunt Anna's letter eight days ago."

Jim stared blankly.

"And what did you say?"

"I told her—oh, Jim, why do you make me keep repeating it—that I have found my happiness out here with you in God's own dear land, and that never, never do I want to go away again."

"You really mean that?"

She stooped and seized the letter which had fluttered from his fingers.

"Of course. Jack was here the day it came. He told me you would never want to leave Australia, to throw up this life of freedom under blue skies and cheering sun. But there"—her beautiful face wreathed with a teasing smile—"perhaps you'd like me to go for a year or two, and come back when you've had time to love me just as much as I do you."

Jim laughed, and, catching her up, crushed her roughly to his heart.

"I guess, dear love of mine, we shall find all the happiness we want out here," he said.

She glanced up, no longer shy but radiant with love.

"With you, my husband, I have found it already. I want you to take me along the little path through the trees to the spot from where that first morning we caught the first glimpse of our new home."

THE END

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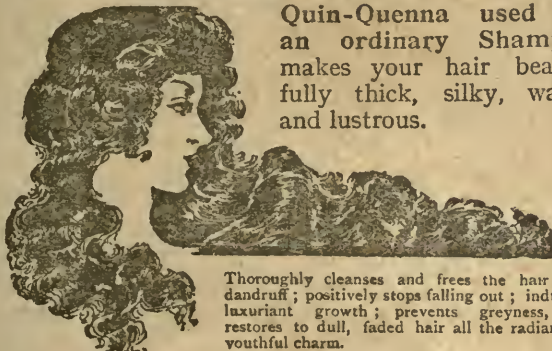
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